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memoirs from the women's movement in India

making a difference

EDITED BY RITU MENON

Making a Difference

*memoirs from the women's movement
in India*

Edited by
Ritu Menon

1984 - 2009



25 YEARS OF FEMINIST PUBLISHING



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RITU MENON

Abbreviations

CASA	Church's Auxiliary for Social Action
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
CTTU	Centre of Indian Trade Unions
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DAWN	Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era
<i>EPW</i>	<i>Economic & Political Weekly</i>
IAWS	Indian Association for Women's Studies
ICSF	International Collective in Support of Fishworkers
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
M-L	Marxist-Leninist
NAPM	National Alliance of People's Movements
NFF	National Fishworkers' Forum
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PCPNDT	Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 1994
PIL	Public Interest Litigation
PUCL	People's Union for Civil Liberties
PUDR	People's Union for Democratic Rights
PWDVA	Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005
UCC	Uniform Civil Code
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Asom
WID	Women in Development
WTO	World Trade Organisation

Introduction: Making a Difference

RITU MENON



PERHAPS I should begin by saying what this book is not. It is not a history of the women's movement in India, nor a reckoning of its achievements or otherwise. And it most certainly is not a comprehensive survey or exhaustive account of campaigns undertaken, struggles fought, battles won. What it offers, instead, is a set of memoirs written by women who have been part of the autonomous women's movement in India over the last twenty-five years, women who were transformed, personally and politically, by their participation in it. Each one of them remains active, to this day, in a movement that has grown, changed, dispersed, diversified, institutionalised itself, perhaps, but never strayed from its overarching objective: social change, and a long-term commitment to ending women's subordination.

For each of the women who has written her memoir there was a before-and-after-the-movement phase, a decisive moment when something changed forever. An experience of discrimination in girlhood or adolescence, dimly understood then, that suddenly fell into place as unfairly and humiliatingly gendered; a realisation, after years of left activism, that male chauvinism survives progressive politics; an understanding, deep down, that patriarchal privilege cuts across class, as well

as caste; a book that became an eye-opener; a relationship begun (or ended) that liberated; an involvement that changed one's perspective – and the penny dropped. When their different, yet common, experiences brought them together and coalesced to form a movement, a sisterhood, however imperfect, was forged.

I asked the women whose memoirs you will read to write about what brought them to the women's movement, to recreate that initial burst of excitement and engagement that marked their entry into it. What motivated them to activism? What sustained them? How difficult has it been to reconcile the individual impulse with collective consensus, the personal with the political? Over the years, the movement has seen fissures, confusions, rancour, disagreements, splits, solidarities – yet it has survived. Over the years, too, feminism has evolved, changed its meaning in different contexts and in our own lives. How relevant is it still, how central is the movement itself?

It's difficult now, in this new century, to recapture or imagine the enormous optimism of those early years of what is called the second wave of the women's movement in India. For close to two decades, from the mid-1970s to the 1990s, it was buoyant, energetic and hugely innovative, drawing from and contributing to other social movements of the time, part of other struggles for civil liberties and democratic rights in the country. Inheritor, too, of radical youth and student movements in India and across the world; of anti-war, pro-peace politics; of regional and international campaigns on the environment and against cultures of war and violence. The quest for social justice everywhere, but especially among those most denied it, created intense political hopes and passions, and the women's movement was part of this great upsurge. To anyone who was in it, its transformative potential, both political and personal, was immense.

Historians of the movement will say its real genesis lay in the social reform movements of the nineteenth century, that it cut its political teeth during the freedom struggle and the nationalist movement of the early twentieth century. True enough. In this sense, the Indian women's movement has always had close links with other liberation movements; indeed, the women's wings of the major political parties have played a significant role in raising issues both within their parties, for the working classes, and in trade unions affiliated with them. But the post-Independence autonomous women's movement has a somewhat different character. For one, it is autonomous and, like the international women's movement, it has no formal structures, no hierarchies, no 'party line', no high priestesses. For another, it is polyphonic, it speaks in many voices, using many tongues. It is often, but not always and not uniformly, feminist, and it may or may not be always uniformly secular. It is urban and rural, and though 'political' in the fundamental sense of the word it has not, so far, been part of party politics.

Yet its impact on other movements and, indeed, on national politics, has been unmistakable. Retaining its autonomy, it has allied with other forces for social change, been part of campaigns and networks and people's movements on any number of issues over the years, and in any number of ways. Of women's movements anywhere in the world, the autonomous women's movement in India is probably unique in the range and diversity of its alliances – including, on specific programmes, with the government. It all seems rather matter of fact now, but the significance of changes in legislation and policy, and of the fact that women's unequal status can no longer be rationalised or condoned, cannot be overstated. Moreover, no movement for progressive social change can afford any longer to avoid or ignore the 'woman question' in its activities or practice.

What those early years of mobilising, consciousness-raising and activism did was to propel many issues considered to be domestic and personal out into the public arena, and force society's attention to focus on them. Family secrets spilled out, abusive homes and relationships were exposed, time-tested customs and prejudices held up to scrutiny – and to criticism or opprobrium. This was hugely unsettling. Not only for families whose misdeeds were now reported and noted, but for women themselves, for whom acknowledging them in the first place was such a difficult thing to do. As Saheli and Vimochana and Sachetana and Forum Against the Oppression of Women – and, in fact, every legal aid or counselling centre – tell us, again and again, women would come for help, seek advice or shelter, be unable to reveal the full extent of abuse or humiliation, and return to an unsafe or inhospitable home. And so it might have remained, had the movement not provided succour and practical help when no other support was forthcoming, had it not also shifted the burden of responsibility from the individual woman's shoulders onto society's.

Making visible, making known, making public in order to make for change, has been a cardinal strategy of the women's movement worldwide, and in India as well. One of the most important, yet invisible, areas has been women's unrecognised, unpaid, unwaged contribution to national economies, both in the form of housework and through their work in the informal sector. Feminist economists have termed this women's productive and reproductive labour; Gabriele Dietrich has a far more evocative and fundamental formulation: she calls it the production of life. The sterling success of the women's movement – and particularly of SEWA, the Self-Employed Women's Association, with its membership in the tens of thousands – in getting the government, the Census, the National Sample Survey Organisation and the International Labour Organisation to acknowledge women's major

contribution to the country's gross domestic product is, in my view, an outstanding example of what 'making visible' can accomplish. That women's labour is still undervalued and, invariably, under- or unpaid is not a failing that can be laid at the movement's door; that it dignified this labour and enabled women to organise in collectives and unions of their own, empowered them to devise and even run their own banks, is certainly one of its critical achievements.

Delinking 'family planning' from population control and hitching it instead to safe contraception for women and to their reproductive health has been another intervention with far-reaching implications, both in policy terms and for changing the discourse on population and development itself. Activism around women's health remains a very important element to this day; the campaign against coercive contraception via injectibles, implants or forced tubectomies is one of the most sustained in the country. Joined later by the fight against sex pre-selection and abortion – or, more baldly, female foeticide – the movement's focus on women's reproductive rights has actually highlighted entrenched social and ethnic biases and the widespread social sanction that son-preference and controlling women's sexuality enjoy. However, there's no giving up – or giving in; as Saheli, which has been at the forefront of this struggle, says:

We have worked with women's organisations, health groups, women's wings of Left parties, mass-based organisations and NGOs from the very beginning of our campaigns...We have thrashed out issues, lobbied and protested...for jointly we are stronger, we are formidable.

— *Saheli: Twenty-five Years of Continuity and Change.*

Like individual women, the movement, too, has had its decisive moments. The Mathura and Rameeza Bi rape cases in the late 1970s led to a snowballing campaign against, and culminated in criminalising, custodial rape by the police. The review

petition on the Mathura judgement filed by Lotika Sarkar, Vasudha Dhagamwar and Upendra Baxi was the beginning of public interest litigation as we know it now. Bride-burning or dowry murders as they came to be called, and the Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Act, 1984; the Chipko movement; the anti-price rise uprising by housewives; the UN Conferences of 1985 and 1995; and the challenge to Muslim Personal Law by Shahnaz Sheikh in 1985 also come to mind. Shah Bano, Roop Kanwar, Bhanwari Devi and Vishakha. Depo-Provera and Net-Oen. The Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 1994. Reservations for women via the Eighty-first amendment to the Constitution in 1996. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. Babri Masjid, 1992. Gujarat, 2002...Each of these marked a milestone for the movement, leading not only to changes in public perception and in the law, but also to great strides made in analysis and action.

Post-Roop Kanwar, the political economy of dowry and sati was laid bare for the first time, located in the structural violence against women and deconstructed from a feminist perspective. As they were debated and discussed, the specifics of dowry deaths and widow immolation ramified into a much more complex consideration of domestic violence and abuse; of marital, caste, communal and custodial rape; and of the central place that women's sexuality occupies in any patriarchal arrangement of social, familial and gender relations, whether of class, caste or community. The more we unravelled this tangled skein, the more knots we found we had to untie. When Shahnaz Sheikh filed her petition against Muslim Personal Law in the Supreme Court, saying it violated her fundamental right to equality, a whole Pandora's box of oppositional rights was opened up: the constitutional guarantee regarding freedom to practice and propagate one's religion militated against the prohibition of discrimination on grounds

of race, sex or religion; community rights of protection confounded individual rights to privacy and choice. A secular state, which nevertheless sanctioned discriminatory religious laws; a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) versus multiple unreformed practices based on custom and religious injunctions. But what was being regulated and policed so assiduously? Why such anxiety around marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody, guardianship and succession? A deep distrust of women's sexuality and the potential for sexual waywardness which would disrupt patriarchal families, communities and caste boundaries, unified the brotherhood of men across religion and class.

And so it continued – into control of women's bodies, mobility, decision-making, labour, speech, education...You name it, and it was strictly regulated. The trouble with making visible, with exposing what was well concealed to light and air, is that it is denied, at best; denounced, ridiculed and dismissed, at worst. And the trouble with feminism is that it goes straight to the heart of the matter – into the sanctity of the home, the bedroom, to the crux of sexual politics. And so the denunciation has come not just from the conservatives and conformists, but from the progressives and social reformists, too. From the academy, the executive, the judiciary, the legislature – not openly, perhaps, but through dissimulation and timorousness. For it's a fact that feminism is one of the most difficult isms to live with because it calls into question every one of the settled equations between men and women, family and society, citizen and state, church and state, the powerful and the powerless.

Inevitably, along with the successes, with the changes from which there was no going back, there were the disappointments. Two steps forward, one step back. Marital rape is still not considered a crime; the legal age at marriage is routinely violated; child marriages are the norm in many parts of the country; female foeticide is a reality; personal

laws are intact; 'honour' killings are on the rise. The radically innovative women's development programme initiated by the government of Rajasthan – which drew the poorest and most illiterate women in the villages into grassroots development, a landmark project that empowered poor women in ways undreamt of – was dismantled for no reason good enough or convincing enough. Mahila Samakhya, whose experimental, feminist redefinition of education – Education for Women's Empowerment – taught adult women in seven states the skills required for self-reliance, for dealing with local governance, for demanding what was due to them by way of goods and services and, if necessary, challenging local vested interests – this, too, was wound up. But once consciousness has been raised and confidence been gained, change has already been set in motion; undoing it may not be quite as simple as discontinuing a programme.

Some decisive moments have had an international provenance. The three UN Decade of Women conferences between 1975-85 and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995; the regional and international meetings, consultations and conferences on trafficking; the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994; and the 2001 Durban Conference on racism are among the more important of these, for here, in discussions between groups from the global North and South, were hammered out the processes for conventions like CEDAW; the recognition that women's rights are human rights; the inducting of special rapporteurs on violence, extra-judicial killings, HIV/AIDS, children in armed conflict; and so on. The many special tribunals that have been held by women's groups across the world – in Vienna, in Tokyo, in Manila, Hongkong, Bangalore, Tunis, and many other cities – were a spin-off from them; even if we accept that sisterhood may or may not be global, the solidarities forged across countries and continents on

particular issues have certainly benefited from strength in numbers. And sometimes, sisterhood may find unexpected resonance, as the National Federation of Dalit Women did in Durban, with women of African descent, on the issue of descent-based discrimination.

No movement can soldier on without replenishing itself every now and then, and the number of street plays, skits, songs, posters, films and videos made by women have recharged not just us, but also our campaigns. *Om Swaha*, a street play on dowry deaths devised by Stree Sangharsh in the late 1970s, is iconic, and many an activist was galvanised into action after seeing it. But there was so much more, such a flood of expression that has become part of the creative history of the movement: Kamla Bhasin's songs – witty, finger-snapping, completely appropriate to the issue; Chandralekha's slogans and posters – "Woman: Born of the Fire of Consciousness", "Empowered/Enslaved"; Sheba Chhachhi's staged but intimate portraits of women activists; the literally hundreds of posters made by women everywhere on everything. Who can forget the power of slogans like *Hum Bharat ki narin hain/Phool nahin, chingari hain* (We are the women of India/Flames, not flowers) or the absolute rightness of *Main likhna seekh rahi hoon, taaki main apni taghdir likh sakun* (I'm learning how to write, so that I can write my own destiny). Slogans and songs, resolutions and statements produced in the hundreds as protest or commemoration, or simply to enliven our demos and conferences or March 8 marches. But they also did something more, something so fundamental that it took a while to register. They enabled women who had never spoken up to find their voice; who had seldom crossed the threshold to act in polemical skits and street plays; who had hovered silent, in the background, to stand on a podium and address a public rally. The result was electrifying.

The cross-fertilisation of ideas and the extremely vibrant – and vital – links between the women's movement and women's studies are an abiding and most welcome and wholesome feature. Pioneering work on violence, the environment, citizenship, militarisation and religious fundamentalism, for example, appeared in the 1980s, followed by serious challenges to historiography, economics, law and sociology in the 1990s. Yet, a somewhat paradoxical situation prevails in the country. The impact of feminist methodologies, analyses and research on major academic disciplines has been significant; feminist academics have introduced and maintained a rigorous critique of disciplinary assumptions and boundaries; have, in fact, introduced an ideological and political perspective on how and what they teach – but full academic recognition eludes women's studies. Because it can claim no disciplinary pedigree, it has been accorded secondary status, been called 'partial' even though its contribution to research and theory can no longer be belittled.

A decisive moment in women's studies, in my view, was the publication of the 1974-75 report, *Towards Equality*, a study undertaken by the government-appointed Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) that mapped the actual status of women across the country. It came out with the alarming finding that, in many ways, women's participation in the economic and political life of the country had actually declined in the post-Independence period. The CSWI report created such ripples in the government and among policy makers and analysts, that it was instrumental in launching two major initiatives: the setting up of thirty-three women's studies centres in universities across the country that would engage in research and activism; and inaugurating a unit in the Indian Council of Social Science Research to support research specifically on women and poverty. The 1988 publication of *Shram Shakti*, detailing women's work in the informal sector,

was equally significant and benefited both from the data collected earlier on women's labour force participation, as well as generated its own very important findings on their productive role in the national economy.

The intervening years saw the setting up of two feminist publishing ventures that complemented each other, broke new ground in academic and periodical publishing, and introduced a critical analytical perspective and manner of presentation that had a far-reaching impact. *Manushi* (1979) and *Kali for Women* (1984) became household words in more ways than one; they were a direct outcome of both the women's movement and women's studies and reflected – and represented – the burgeoning of feminist action-research and analysis. There was such an explosion of information and writing at the time that all media seemed to have been affected. Print journalism increased its coverage (albeit often in a sensationalist mode) of what it called 'women's issues'; television programmes and advertising came in for sharp criticism on their portrayal of women; mainstream cinema was looked at with a feminist gaze; and received wisdom in the humanities and social sciences was vigorously challenged. Those two decades, 1975-1995, saw the kind of ferment in research, writing and publishing, on and by women, that was unprecedented and, I think, will be difficult to repeat. What endures, however, is the space that women's studies has carved out for itself in academia – but not only there. The Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS), set up in 1982, must be the only academic body in the country that has a very large non-academic, activist membership. It was Madhuriben Shah, one of the founders of IAWS and erstwhile chairperson of the University Grants Commission, who said that activism was the third arm of education, the other two being teaching and research. IAWS has taken this to heart, and both women's studies and the women's movement have

acquired cutting-edge relevance as a result of putting this into practice. The bi-annual IAWS conferences, held in rotation in different parts of the country in association with one or other university, must be the only 'academic' conferences that see such a large number of activists participating, and participating vociferously! But what I find even more remarkable, and unusual, is the strong presence of feminist scholars and academics at the autonomous women's conferences held periodically, in environments that couldn't be further removed from the groves of academe, attended by women in their thousands. More than one memoirist has mentioned these in her memoir – of which the one in Bombay, in 1980, seems to have struck a major chord with everyone who was there, and became a turning point for many.

Somehow, everything seemed so much simpler then, issues and our responses to them were more clear-cut than is possible today, and optimism of the will appeared to triumph over pessimism of the intellect. Yet, by the mid-1980s and the time of Shah Bano and Roop Kanwar, a regressive identity politics and incipient majoritarianism had already come into play, and it would affect the women's movement in ways we could not have foreseen. The once unequivocal demand for the UCC, for example, was now subdued; groups that had actively campaigned for it now felt a strategic retreat was called for because right-wing parties were stridently insisting on it; and eventually, it was quietly shelved. By the time Flavia Agnes posed her challenge in the early Nineties to the taken-for-granted 'secularism' of the women's movement, the fissures were evident. On the plus side, however, a great deal of sophisticated empirical and analytical writing was done on the subject, gender-just family laws drafted, and an optional civil code proposed. But the situation on the ground remains unchanged.

To the old, unresolved issues have been added new ones

that, some say, are possibly even more intractable. In regions across the country, states of siege have persisted for years, ethnic and communal conflicts have escalated and, inevitably, violence against women has increased sharply. But not only. Women are caught in the crossfire between state-supported and retaliatory violence, in much the same way as they are caught between the multiple patriarchies of family, community and state; and, as a spin-off of this, we have had to acknowledge the role of right-wing and militant women in the kind of politics that makes for a social change that is regressive. Movements in the north-east and in Kashmir for the restoration of democratic rights and civil liberties, for justice in the face of human rights violations, extra-judicial killings and mass 'disappearances' have brought the issue of citizenship centre-stage; the figure of Irom Sharmila, on a decade-old fast unto death in protest against the continued imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act in Manipur is symbolic, a powerful reminder of the 'naming and shaming' by women of state crimes against innocent people and state impunity against prosecution. In Manipur, in Gujarat, in Kashmir, this impunity has been flaunted brazenly, but the resistance to it by women and their sustained exposure of it through reports, testimonies, citizens' tribunals, and reams and reams of documentation and analysis, have been unflagging.

It seems sometimes that the number of old and new issues that we have to deal with are overwhelming, that the number of new fronts opening up with the liberalisation of the economy and globalisation, require the kind of resources – human and other – that the movement scarcely has in order to tackle them. The very rights to food and life, to education and health are under serious threat, and it is on these survival issues that the movement has made alliances with other civil society groups working on food security, the environment, development-induced displacement, housing, and, of course,

human rights. Unusually, in the experience of women's movements worldwide, these alliances have been a two-way process. The National Alliance of People's Movements, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the Bhopal Gas Peedit Samiti, the People's Union for Democratic Rights and the People's Union for Civil Liberties, Sampradayikta Virodhi Manch, the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, the National Campaign on Housing, and many others, have had the active participation of feminists and have campaigned jointly on issues of shared concern, but also incorporated a gender perspective in their own work.

In this time of people-to-people exchanges and track two and civil society initiatives, we tend to forget that the South Asian women's movement was among the earliest to breach borders, reach across and affirm solidarity with a hug, a handshake, an embrace. The number of alliances that were made, strong bonds forged and collaborations begun among women in the five countries of the region is truly remarkable. It is the autonomous women's movement, unconstrained by a 'party line', that brought a regional perspective to bear on everything from religion, development and the environment, to personal laws, militarisation, armed conflict, ethnic identities, separatist and militant movements, and so many other issues of common concern that spill over borders and political geographies, impacting countries and people distant from their point of origin.

How many workshops and conferences and trainings and joint actions we have all had the tremendous privilege and pleasure to be part of, in each other's countries – but, if there is one person who must surely be the (feminist) flag-bearer of this South Asian networking, it is Kamla Bhasin, who has worked not only with women's groups, but also grassroots organisations, workers' movements and diverse collectives dealing with a range of local, national or regional concerns.

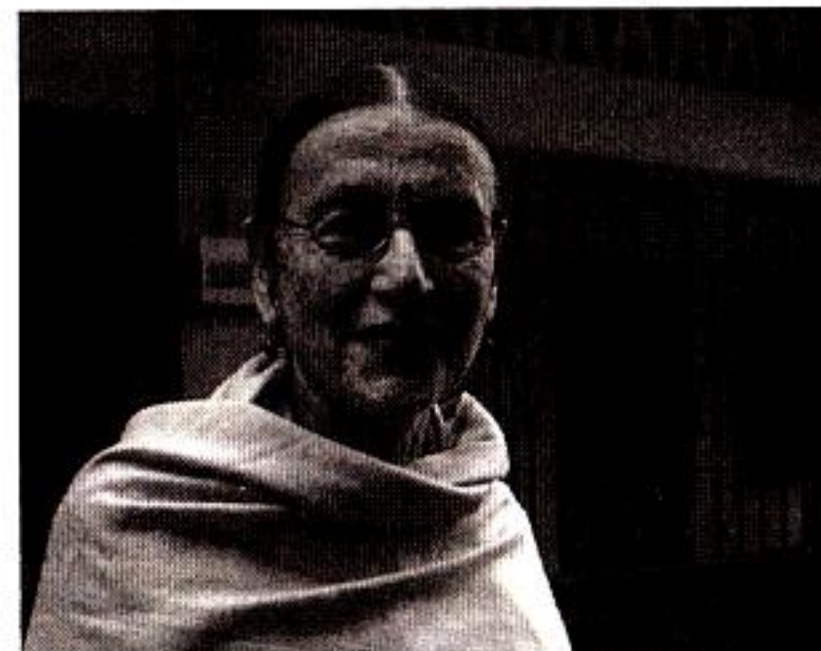
The memoirs reflect all these alliances; this is not surprising, as so many women came to feminism from the trade union and left movements, from organising at the grassroots, working with landless labourers, and so on. These earlier histories and current affiliations allow for the kind of geographic spread and representation that indicate the range and diversity of engagement, confounding any simple – or simplistic – characterisation of the movement as 'urban' or 'middle class' or 'exclusive'. It is true that not everyone or everything is comprehensively present in this collection – no single offering can accomplish that – and it is also the case that some are under-represented; but, in all sincerity, this is not for want of trying. There are many reasons for these gaps, limitations of time or availability being the most common. This, too, is not surprising because we all know how many things we are juggling at any given moment, how many pressing commitments compel us to defer putting pen to paper. Sitting down to write a memoir seems almost like self-indulgence, then. And so we are missing almost a dozen accounts that were sought but couldn't be written; hopefully, they will be at some point and will enable us to put together a sequel to this volume.

But why memoirs in the first place? Aren't they too subjective, too selective, too susceptible to falsification? Too private, even? Isn't remembering itself unreliable? The answer to all these questions is obviously, yes, but a yes that must immediately be qualified. All memoirs are constructed, shaped and mediated not only by language, but by where, and at what stage, we happen to be in our lives when we recall. In writing a memoir one chooses, combines and conflates, represses, exaggerates, reconstructs. Memories are elusive, deceptive – but to say 'memoir' implies already that what is being described or communicated has its affects attached; that situations, acts, moments are being examined in social, political and personal space; that the memoirist is making an honest and

ethical attempt to record a kind of history in the making. She is trying to recapture that single or singular moment that determined, as Paula Giddings says, “where and when I enter” – that is, enter the social and political space as an active agent. The difficult, almost impossible, task of culling events, moments, chance encounters from the flow means that an account is almost always incomplete, often paradoxical. But such moments, events, encounters also serve to map our movement in history; such accounts safeguard against the amnesia about political movements. So remembering may well be unreliable, but forgetting is erasure. This book is a counter to historical forgetting.

Women’s contribution to, and participation in, social and political movements has a tendency to disappear, to be subsumed in the ‘larger’ histories, to blend into the background. To many activists and analysts, the very successes of the Indian women’s movement, its ‘mainstreaming’ and ‘institutionalising’, are an indication of its ‘appropriation’ or co-optation into the (male) establishment, signalling a blunting of its political edge. Others fear that its mobilising energy has been channelled into advocacy and lobbying, to the detriment of activism – why, even rallying together on March 8 seems to have run out of steam. It is true that the movement has dispersed, that its energy has been redirected; some say it has aged, others that it has matured. What is undeniable is that it perseveres, that the persistence of its resistance to inequality, injustice and discrimination is proof of its staying power, of staying alive.

The stories in this book are a political inheritance, by no means comprehensive or representative of the thousands of women who make up the movement, but symbolic of a collective experience shared by a generation of activists for whom feminism offered the exhilarating possibility of transforming both the personal, and the political.



Gabriele Dietrich, hailing from what was West Berlin, has spent most of her working life based in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, teaching social analysis and feminist theology in a Tamil-medium college. She has been intensely involved with women’s movements, unions in the unorganised sector, anti-nuclear campaigns and ecological movements. She has been a national convener of the National Alliance of People’s Movements and has also been very active in the Indian Association for Women’s Studies. She has published widely on all these movements and has been on the move throughout the country, mostly on trains and buses. Her doctoral thesis on the history of religions aimed at an intercultural dialogue from an anti-colonial perspective. She has been recognised for her contribution to dismantling patriarchy in religions and has also insightfully conceptualised the connections between patriarchy, caste, class, and the intensifying violence on nature, accompanied by a loss of democratic substance and the increasing militarisation of the state. She is known for her poems and paintings and has mothered two children, while nurturing many organisations. She has been a naturalised Indian citizen since 1990.

Upholding Each Other

GABRIELE DIETRICH

WHEN Ritu first asked me to write on my experiences in the women's movement, I realised she was keen to excavate some of the exhilarating moments of those pioneering times. I was wracking my brains for a memory of my 'conversion' to feminism. I couldn't deliver.

I realised that I had undergone a socialisation which had impacted women's survival instincts under extreme conditions. Having been born prematurely in the bathroom of a strained hospital in the wake of a civil bombardment in Berlin in 1943 – because my mother had fallen down the shelter steps in the rush of alarm – life went on in this vein for the next few years: no mother's milk, no milk, no soap, very little food, a teddy bear from the neighbour's boy who had died of cholera. Evacuation, migration, more bombs, more hunger... When we landed up in familiar environs again, it was in a city of rubble, occupied by four armies. The women (my mother and grandmother) ran our daily life, queued for rations; the men had died in action or were held in prisoners' camps. I first saw my father when I was five. Like most children in school I was a single child, because many women decided to produce one child so as to evade being drafted into production in an ammunition factory. It was the kind of situation which made social psychologists in the Fifties and Sixties write books with titles of regret like *World without Fathers* or *The Incapacity to*

Mourn, the latter trying to grapple with the culture of denial regarding the incomprehensible catastrophe of fascism and the Holocaust.

During the blockade of Berlin in 1948, which we survived by being trooped off to a Swedish soup kitchen, my mother decided to take me across the green border, together with another woman with a daughter like me. We had to walk through the forest for five hours without speaking, because "the Soviet army shoots without warning". I was mortally scared of the Soviet army as we had spent months under its occupation. Nearby, all the young women on the street had been raped. Though, being children, we didn't know what was happening, my cousin and I could hear the screams in the night. We would feel my mother's and grandmother's bodies go stiff when they – children clutched tight – confronted a soldier. Decades later it dawned on me that, in a way, my cousin and I had served as a kind of human shield. Her mother had disappeared in the mines during flight and turned up traumatised after many months. A few years later, mother and daughter emigrated to America. We visited my father in his realm of relative plenty, a village in a northern province, where he was 'de-Nazified' from his SA-membership in order to be able to serve as a minor clerk in the administration again. My mother taught adult education classes, how to recycle old woollens, and also imparted some English to people who aimed at migrating to the US or Canada. My grandmother stitched old clothes into new. The blockade and occupation led to the Cold War which culminated in the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961.

My decisive political formation came from the resistance of the West Berlin population to caving in under threats of blockades and starvation in order to take over their city and make the united East and West Berlin the capital of the GDR. A deeply stirring event was the uprising by workers against

the Workers' State, in June 1953, against higher production norms. They marched through the main road where I went to school, onto the Rote Rathaus (the red building of the Eastern Administration), right through the Brandenburg Gate. Onlookers cheered them on with cigarettes and foodstuffs, but of course the uprising was extinguished by Soviet tanks. It was in the same year that Stalin died, and his dead body in the black-and-white of the newsreel is etched in my memory forever. I had also seen him decorating 'deserving mothers' with twelve children. I somehow believed that there was less likelihood of war and tyranny now, and that women would be allowed to bear fewer children. The workers' uprising was an extremely energising ray of hope. Though it was crushed immediately, I happily donated my piggy bank savings to the Hungarian uprising four years later. Our last hope was the students' revolt of 1968 and the Prague Spring, again crushed by Soviet tanks. Had there been socialist democracy in Eastern Europe, had the Soviet Union not invaded Afghanistan, had Allende been allowed to stay in power in Chile, the world could have looked very different today.

I was deeply inspired at the age of eleven by the diary of Anne Frank who, despite her personal experience, believed in the inherent goodness of human beings. Her dreams of becoming a writer and journalist while watching the chestnut tree blossom in the Prinsengracht (the secret quarters where she and her family were kept in hiding), moved me to tears. It was a fairly gentle and sheltered way to access the history of fascism. In school, we were shown documentaries about concentration camps, fascism, social democracy after World War I, the League of Nations – but there were few women in this rendering of history. Somewhere along the way, from an old workers' song, I realised that there had been a woman called Rosa Luxemburg who, together with Karl Liebknecht, had been shot by the army under social democratic rule

between the Wars, their dead bodies thrown into the Landwehr canal. Decades later, I read some of her letters and writings and came across the book by Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Theory of Revolution*. From there, it was a relatively short distance to the debates on women, the 'last colony', and the realisation that women were not really the last colony, that internal colonies were all the time recreated by capitalism, consisting of dalits, adivasis, workers in the unorganised sector, impoverished peasants and tribal populations in the north-eastern states of India.

My mother decided to divorce my father about nine years after his return from the War. It was a classic case of the inability to readjust after nearly ten years of a long-distance marriage due to war and imprisonment. Women had survived flight, migration, civil bombardments, and had reorganised life, removing the debris. Men came from the trenches and prisoners' camps and found it difficult to restore what they had dreamt of as 'normalcy'. Many families broke up. My mother, who had worked as a typist after ten years of schooling, took adult education classes and passed a teacher's training examination. My father tried to deny alimony for me, his only child, but the court decided otherwise. He also underwent some adult education and paid up. My mother dinned it into my head that it was crucial to have a good education and a good job. She was not too clear what this might mean, as she herself never had either of these. Her imagination vacillated between a school teacher (with lots of holidays) and perhaps a film star. She sent me to ballet classes, but when she realised that I took them very seriously and contemplated becoming a classical dancer, she was horrified.

Worse shocks were in store. At age twelve or thirteen, I realised that some people in my class had joined confirmation classes. This is a training among Protestant Christians, which serves as the 'confirmation' of faith for youngsters who have

received child baptism (a name-giving ceremony which welcomes children into the congregation). Somehow, since I was close to death just after birth and life was in constant turmoil and danger, I had been baptised in the melee. But since then I hadn't seen a church from the inside, except during some school excursions and I had met no practicing Christians. My grandmother, widowed with three small children and a refugee of WW I, held the view that God, if he existed, had somehow done a very poor job in allowing so much warfare to happen. I had walked out of religious instruction in school saying, "There was a man who came and said, God has a son. So there must be two Gods, but he says there's only one. He also believes in the Devil. He believes we are all very sinful. I don't want to go there." I did not need to, as the classes were optional.

When people went to confirmation classes, I wanted instead some secular rite of passage. I wanted to mark my 'growing up' but that was denied to me because "people will think we are communists". So I decided to try the instruction at the local church. I joined a youth group of adolescent girls which helped me out of my loneliness in my three-generations-of-women household, and reading the Bible at this impressionable age opened up many new insights. The greatest revelation of all was that there had been a Confessing Church under fascism which had seriously resisted Nazi tyranny and the terror of the concentration camps. There had been people who had risked and laid down their lives in the resistance. This was in stark contrast to my mother's version, who from the first time I asked her, until her death had always said, "We never knew about the concentration camps." In all likelihood this was subjectively true, but I found it very difficult to digest, because for some time we had been living in a hut on a garden only two train stations away from Oranienburg, which accommodated the concentration camp of

Sachsenhausen from where the annihilation in the other camps was planned. I was told: "We thought this was only a labour camp." Indeed, it had no gas chambers. Executions were only by shooting or hanging. But had they not heard the shooting?

To the horror of my family, I started singing in the church choir and teaching Sunday school. I came to know a woman who was an assistant pastor and seeing her, I was inspired to study theology. It did not deter me that women had no right to ordination at the time and were terminated when they married. I was confident this could be changed. When my mother said I would never find a husband, I shrugged: so what? However, closer acquaintance with academic theology and the autocratic structure of the church made me look for other horizons. I realised that the Holocaust had been preceded by colonial atrocities. I studied Judaism and Indology, finally sociology and the history of religions, paying special attention to the violent wiping out of cultures like the Aztecs of Mexico who, as I realised, had often been exceedingly violent themselves. Was there no end to violence? Was militarism ever-present?

I became part of the students' movement from the very outset, in Berlin, in 1964. This was a very male-dominated affair, but we did not notice this too much, as women were present in large numbers, though rarely in leading positions. We also bravely lived through the sexual revolution since we had learned from psychologists like Wilhelm Reich that fascism was rooted in sexual oppression. I remember once, in Heidelberg, we demanded equal facilities for women students by having a shower-in at the male hostel – the boys taking flight in horror. The women did get more bathrooms after that.

Third World causes like the Vietnam war, the various revolutions in Latin America and the anti-racism struggle in South Africa, along with conflicts in what was called the

'Middle East' were very crucial for us; exposure to the 'Third World' in order to learn from different cultures and political processes, was high on the agenda. At the same time, I had also joined a leftist study circle of women to read Marxist texts among ourselves in order to become ideologically self-reliant. I also had a stint in the Socialist Women's Association in Berlin led by Frigga Haug, who later became a leading leftist feminist and publisher.

After a series of more or less turbulent relationships, I entered into marriage with Bas Wielinga, a double-reformed Calvinist and Marxist from the Netherlands, who had worked in a Dutch Ecumenical Centre in Berlin and had written a dissertation on Lenin's path to revolution. At that time, we did not anticipate that a different cultural setting could create such strain on a relationship that was affectionate, enlightened and in fairly strong ideological harmony. Landing up in a thoroughly intact patriarchal environment in Tamil Nadu in the mid-Seventies was a huge surprise. We came to India on a boat, leaving Marseille on December 8, 1971 and reaching at the end of January 1972, due to the Bangladesh war. As we worked with the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS) in Bangalore, under Dr. M.M. Thomas, we had the opportunity for making broad contacts: Dr. A.R. Desai and Neera Desai being among our early encounters. M.M. Thomas, in many respects a great inspiration in my life, at that time believed that feminism was a western aberration, that in India we had goddesses as well as Indira Gandhi. In 1973, I was in a women's workshop at the Youth Conference of the Christian Conference of Asia (held in Kuala Lumpur) with fiery activists like Jurgette Honculada and Aida Carlos from the Philippines. I stood my ground in discussion with MMT, but it took ten to fifteen years for him to change his mind!

That same year, the first Asian Seminar on Religion and

Development was held in Bangalore by François Houtart and Geneviève Lemerminier, who taught us methods of social analysis. These we developed further with activists from the Indian Social Institute (ISI) in Bangalore and, of course, Nalini Nayak from the fishworkers' movement in Trivandrum. We incorporated an analysis of caste and patriarchy in very innovative ways. In the same year, I also ventured out to the East Thanjavur area, where Krishnammal Jaganathan and S. Jaganathan had begun organising dalits, with women at the forefront, after the Kizhvenmani arson of December 1968 in which forty-four dalits, mostly women and children, were killed in the hut where they took refuge during a wage dispute with a violent landlord. Krishnammal also played an important role in the 1980s when the Bodhgaya Movement fought for land rights for women in Bihar. Later, in the Nineties, she fought against alcoholism and violence in East Thanjavur again and gave immense support to the struggle to oust the prawn farms, which ruined soil and water resources in the Cauvery delta. She also started a movement for building simple brick houses for landless workers. Her energy and determination, even when she was in her eighties, have been a lasting inspiration for the local population.

It so happened that my first encounter with a very broad spectrum of women's activism occurred during a women's conference organised by the journal *Social Scientist* in Trivandrum in December 1975. The atmosphere was very much determined by the Emergency which Mrs. Gandhi had declared in the summer of the same year, leading to a violation of constitutional rights, censorship and rampant arrests of resisters. I had just returned from the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Nairobi, where I had encountered a strong contingent of American feminist theologians, as well as a divided Indian delegation, torn between support and condemnation of the Emergency.

M.M. Thomas, then chairman of the executive of the WWC, managed to push through a resolution against it.

What I encountered at the Trivandrum conference was totally fascinating, because there was an amazingly wide spectrum of representation of feminists with some kind of Marxist or socialist background, but many of them quite independent or even explicitly critical of left party politics. I very vividly remember Chhaya Datar, then a young trade unionist and mother of two young sons, who told us of her experiences among the tobacco workers in Nipani. Gail Omvedt, who was working on Jothiba Phule's movement in Maharashtra, held forth on the rural roots of women's liberation in India. Kumari Jayawardena, whom I had earlier met in Sri Lanka as a historian of the working class movement and activist in workers' education, was developing a critique of the marginalisation of women in the anti-colonial struggles. A few years later, Kumari was teaching courses in development studies with Maria Mies at the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague, and Chhaya wrote a critical study of the socialist conceptualisation of the women's question, which she shared with me in the late Seventies when I wrote critically on the Marxist position on women and household labour, presented in debates in *Social Scientist*.

During the late Seventies and early Eighties there was an upsurge of so-called non-party political formations, some called social action groups, which set out to go among the people and organise them. In north India, Jayaprakash Narayan's total revolution and struggle against the Emergency galvanised enthusiastic participation. The defeat of Mrs. Gandhi in the elections of 1977 was a great victory for democratic forces. For a few years, despite the chaos of the Janata government, there seemed to be a space opening up for independent forces of transformation. Tragically, but rather unavoidably, many of these energetic groups transformed into full-fledged NGOs

and got stuck in the vagaries of changing funding policies. But there were also loose formations like the Christians for Socialism, who related closely to the fishworkers' movement in Kerala; and the feminist thinking process which had become viable to us in the Seventies, seeped into the nooks and corners of some unions in the unorganised sector, especially through Nalini Nayak's involvement with the fishworkers. Though Nalini was not herself a great feminist (as she was initially not conscious of discrimination against women), she later became one of the most persistent organisers of women, and my close friend. Another consistently great inspiration has been Gita Ramakrishnan, whose heart is with the construction workers' union and other unions in the unorganised sector, and who was one of the founding members of Pennurimai Iyakkam (Movement for Women's Rights) in 1979 in Madras. I myself have remained an active member of Pennurimai Iyakkam throughout and have tried to enhance women's participation in union work, but the balancing act between the different logic of the movements has remained difficult to maintain. The conflict between 'larger' issues of transformation and so-called 'women's issues' proper, including case work, remains forever difficult to resolve.

The early Eighties brought many new insights. I remember bumping into Vandana Shiva (then still with husband and small son) one fine winter morning over breakfast at the ISI in Delhi, where she gave me an enthusiastic overview of her forthcoming book, *Staying Alive*. There is now a silver jubilee edition of the book, and whatever critique some of us may have had regarding women's innate ecological knowledge systems, there is simply no doubt that this book has made a tremendous impact, and that Vandana's high profile and untiring ecological activism have created a great deal of feminist ecological awareness inside and outside the country.

The Seventies and Eighties also saw the formation of the

autonomous women's movement, starting with a conference in Bombay in 1980 and the formation of the Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS) in 1982. It was Chhaya Datar who made me aware of these processes and who urged me to become part of them. I first participated in the IAWS conference in Trivandrum in 1984, where a strong activist caucus put pressure on more academically inclined participants, and where Vibhuti Patel created a ruckus because her secular sensibilities had been offended by the breaking of a coconut at the opening ceremony! It was at that conference that I began feeling strongly that I truly wanted to belong. The IAWS at that time had Vina Mazumdar "at the helm", as she used to say. Vinadi was immensely generous in admitting my paper on women's political participation in ideologically different movements for presentation, though it had not been registered in time. She was impressively energetic and compassionate. Her participation in preparing *Towards Equality*, the early Seventies report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, gave her deep insights and humility. I had known Dr. A.R. Desai since my earlier work at CISRS in Bangalore and only now realised that Neera Desai was a great pathbreaker in women's studies. I was also deeply impressed by Maithreyi Krishnaraj and her husband, Krishnaraj, then chief editor of the *Economic & Political Weekly* (EPW). In those years we felt free to walk into people's offices and make personal contact – human relationships were direct and close.

The autonomous women's conference in Bombay in 1985, in a big hall near Karr Road, was a dramatic event. I was forty-two years old, had a daughter of eight and a son of four-and-a-half by then, and had been diagnosed with grade four cells in a cancer check-up. The conference took place over Christmas, but I abandoned my family and plunged into it. Chhaya was helping me get a second opinion at the Tata Memorial Centre, but that same night, Nandita Gandhi (of

Forum Against the Oppression of Women) and Hamsa, an activist from the UK, met with a serious car accident. As Nandita had a lot of local support, I shared duty with Parita Mukta (who was writing her book on Meera bai at the time) to look after Hamsa, who had a torn liver. It was a moment of heightened awareness of the extreme fragility of life. At the same time, I was involved in a workshop on women and religion and had been asked to speak on religion as a supportive force for women's liberation, in case such a thing existed. Because of my specific background, I had something to say on the issue, and the article which I wrote in this context immediately found its way into EPW. I conducted this workshop together with Mirai Chatterjee of SEWA; little did we know then what was in store for women in Ahmedabad at the beginning of the new century.

In the meantime, I had applied for Indian citizenship because of my conviction that a full engagement with people's organisations required me to be a citizen. I had begun the process in 1984 but the difficulties I encountered require an article of their own! My application had the support of a local MLA and Dr. C.T. Kurien, then director of the Madras Institute of Development Studies, and a 'character certificate' from M.M. Thomas who, in the late Eighties, became Governor of Nagaland. However, it was the backing of people like Vina Mazumdar and, especially, C.P. Sujaya, who knew of our women's movement from her stint at the Ministry of Women and Child Development, that helped me face all the hurdles I encountered. This started with the local clerk in the Collector's Office telling me: "Waste, madam. This will never work. Let your hubby apply first and you'll get it automatically." My husband, though supportive of my decision, had never dreamt of applying for citizenship himself. I am, in all likelihood, the only example of a woman married to a foreign citizen to be naturalised, due largely to the wholehearted

support of my senior friends in the movement as well as the very sound advice of Justice Krishna Iyer – and a beautiful letter from the Free Legal Aid Board at the Madras High Court. I received my acceptance letter in 1989, but it so happened that this coincided with the “Coastal March: Protect Water, Protect Life” of the National Fishworkers’ Forum (NFF). Supported by large numbers of women, the march broke up due to police firing on May 1, 1989, in which six fishermen were badly injured. The conflict was triggered to a large extent by the struggle against the upcoming nuclear power plant in Kudankulam. Everybody dispersed in anguish. I took the fight forward and wrote another article for *EPW* titled, “Breakthrough Despite Breakdown”.

Nineteen eighty-nine was also the year which started with a major workshop organised by Kamla Bhasin in February at the Ecumenical Christian Centre, Whitefield, and reported by all of us together under the title, *Pressing Against the Boundaries*. The most heartrending aspect of this workshop was the participation of Rajani Rajasingham, who told us that her life was in danger because of her work with University Teachers for Human Rights in Jaffna, where she worked as professor of anatomy. She was shot dead by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in September 1989 as she made her way home on a bicycle, thirty-five years old, leaving two daughters behind. I had known Rajani since 1977 when I had held Bible studies for the World Student Christian Federation in Colombo, where Rajani, as well as Nimalka Fernando, participated as members of the Sri Lankan Student Christian Movement. I was shattered by Rajani’s violent death. I spoke on her sacrifice at a commemoration meeting for Tamil and Sinhala martyrs in Madras shortly after the LTTE liquidated nineteen cadres of the Eelam People’s Revolutionary Liberation Front there. We were living in dangerous times.

Towards the end of the Eighties we were also confronted

with the question of communalism in a starkly different way. While in the mid-Eighties, in the wake of the Shah Bano judgement, we had nevertheless raised the demand for a Uniform Civil Code, the withdrawal of Shah Bano from her victory (because she “did not want to be the cause for a communal riot”) changed the situation considerably. The question of “genuine religious reforms”, which I had raised in 1985, arose in a different form with the necessity of reforming religious family laws. At the IAWS conference in Calcutta in 1991, Flavia Agnes pointedly raised the question of “unconscious majority communalism” in the women’s movement. I had known Flavia for years, ever since she had gone public as a victim of domestic violence, and later transformed herself with great grit into a law student and a successful women’s lawyer. I myself presented a paper on “Women’s Movements and Dalit Movements”, in which I raised the question of whether the women’s movement could be a force against communalism, but ultimately we were all overtaken by the aggravated situation of the early Nineties, which brought about globalisation; the opportunities of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution; the disastrous opening of the locks of Babri Masjid and its subsequent destruction; the Muslim Women’s (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill; the rise of the BJP; and the murder of Shankar Guha Niyogi, one of the most outstanding trade union leaders of all time. However, the Ambedkar centenary in 1990 and the celebration of his contribution to the nation did give great impetus to dalit movements, including land struggles.

After the shoot-out at Tiananmen Square in Beijing in May 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in November the same year (what a year!), it became apparent that democratic socialism was not going to happen in the near future, and that capitalism was now projecting itself as having won the battle. Though developments in Eastern Europe had been depressing,

it was clear to me that capitalism was not going to deliver the goods. I came down with a fever, recalling the great contrast between, on the one hand, the euphoric and energetic autonomous women's conference in Patna in 1988, where eight hundred women camped in a chaotic school building with six loos, but experienced great excitement in the heady mix of women's organisations and M-L activism and, on the other, the events of 1989 which led in the 1990s to rising polarisation between rich and poor, a tremendous upsurge of identity politics, rising communalism, and the absurd claim that "the Buddha was smiling" at the nuclear explosion in Pokhran in 1998. I refrained from attending the international women's conference in Beijing in 1995, because I felt strongly that the hectic pre-Beijing and post-Beijing activity was busily diverting the energy of women's movements and pressing them into complete NGO-isation.

At the IAWS conference in Jaipur in 1995, which Kamla Bhasin as general secretary inspired with her songs and infectious sense of humour, there was a plenary session at which Medha Patkar requested support for the formation of the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM). It so happened that she entrusted me with working in Tamil Nadu and I threw myself into intensive activity for several years. I participated in some parts of the national yatra which led to the Wardha conference of early 1996. There has been no looking back since – 2003 saw another national yatra, "*Desh Bachao, Desh Banao*"; 2007 saw a prolonged struggle, "Action 2007", from March to May on the streets of Delhi. In the unions, the struggle for comprehensive legislation for workers in the unorganised sector absorbed me to a considerable extent. Balancing the ideological streams of a reconceptualised Marxism, Ambedkar-thought, Gandhism and socialism as put forward during the Lohia Centenary, remains a big challenge for me.

At the ideological and conceptual levels, the shift from patriarchy-caste-class analysis to gender and masculinity has contributed to obscuring the immensity of the economic and ecological crises. Post-modern and post-colonial discourses have led to a culturalisation of analysis, while the enormity of poverty and inequality, together with species extinction, global warming and the nuclear threat have been insufficiently registered. The above-mentioned ideological streams, which we have tried to amalgamate in the NAPM, have not taken on board the feminist analysis of the production of life and livelihood vs. production for profit with sufficient seriousness.

Let me finally say something very important which has not yet come to the fore in this essay: the most important lessons I have learnt have come from the urban and rural poor in India, who have struggled for their survival and for that of their children with undaunted energy. Without encountering this zest for life, I would never have had the determination to bear and bring up my own children. I have also learnt enormously from 'traditional' women who, without a second thought, made sacrifices cheerfully, because they had been brought up to do so. I am indebted to the college in which I have worked for thirty-four years, because it provided a space and an ever-changing community for my family and myself in which I was able to forge deep relationships. The people with whom we lived suffered my feminism and I suffered the straitjackets of conservatism, but there was always mutual respect and, sometimes, even a sense of humour. I had to run off into movement struggles to survive in this environment, but I also had a support structure in my daily life which provided stability and trust to my children. I have felt frequently that I have been a bad wife, mother and grandmother, because I am eternally on the road, packing and unpacking and repacking my luggage, but I feel greatly reassured by Ritu telling me that we are never bad wives, mothers and

grandmothers if we try to make the world a better place! So be it, and may our children have the courage to face the mess which we have left behind for them, all the same. Friendships, which the movement helped forge, have been one of the most life-supporting gifts, though we were always too busy to give them enough time. It is these friendships which have carried us through shattering experiences, illness and despair. There have been the most terrible losses, like the death of Kamla's daughter, Meeto, but we have persevered, tried to console each other and affirmed life in all its fullness. Friendships have also extended beyond the immediate movement. There has been a culture of affirming each other and daring to love, much beyond competitiveness – which is not always absent.

Let me conclude by saying that I have been greatly encouraged by the younger generation in the shape of some of my women students. While the men tend to slip into readymade roles, the women have to find their own way and carve out their own niche. They often do this with great persistence. They have been inspired by women's movements in immeasurable ways. I have learned from them, through their life situations, and in great depth from the situation of dalits and tribals in the north-east. I have also learned much from Seno Tsua of the North East Network, from Adlin, Diki and Maming. May they blossom and infuse many others with their spirit.

Parts of this essay have been written on train journeys for an NAPM meeting in Chhattisgarh, in Dantewada, where Himanshu Kumar's ashram has been destroyed and where the police amassed crowds of goons from the Salwa Judum camp to intimidate and hunt out anyone trying to visit prisoners of the state like Sodi Shambu and Kopa Kunjam. The escalating rape of women and of natural resources in adivasi areas seems like a replay of "the rape of women and the rape of the sea" of the Seventies and Eighties in aggravated form. I do

not feel that women's movements in the present context are equipped to deal with the enormous onslaught of displacement, eviction and rising militarisation. But being alive and kicking, and struggling with great persistence is one important thing we have learnt from each other.

Ruth Vanita is a professor at the University of Montana, was a reader in English at Delhi University, and was founding co-editor of *Manushi* (1978-1990). She is the author of several books, including *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings in Literature and History* (with Saleem Kidwai); *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination*; *Gandhi's Tiger and Sita's Smile: Essays on Gender, Culture and Sexuality*; *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West*; and *A Play of Light: Selected Poems*. She is a well-known translator of fiction and poetry from Hindi to English; her latest translation is *The Co-Wife and Other Stories* by Premchand. She has published essays on Shakespeare in several journals, most recently in *Shakespeare Survey*, 2007. She is currently completing a book on gender, urbanity and speech in Urdu poetry, 1780-1870.



"More Lives than One": *Manushi* and the Women's Movement¹

RUTH VANITA

When I joined the women's movement in 1977, I was a shy, bookish girl who had led a sheltered life; fourteen years later, when I ceased to be an activist, I was still shy and bookish but had accumulated a range and depth of experience that would not otherwise have been within my reach.

I grew up with the enabling myth of equality; despite encountering many everyday examples of male domination, it never occurred to me that anyone might think a male inherently superior to me. My family belonged to a small, endogamous, Puritan sect of Protestantism, which tended to isolate us in various ways; however, it was a family of educationists and there were several single, working women in the extended clan. Marriage, though normative, was not perceived as the only respectable way of life. This perception was reinforced by my education at Miranda House, where several teachers were unmarried women.

A regular diet of the Bible and English literature, in combination with the nationalist and socialist leanings of Springdales in Delhi, where I studied up to middle school, had made my mind fertile ground for radical ideas. At nineteen, I

¹"For he who lives more lives than one/More deaths than one must die" – Oscar Wilde

picked up the *Communist Manifesto* in a classmate's room in the Miranda House hostel; it had the light-bulb effect, seeming to illuminate and connect everything. Over the next year, I tried to find a left-wing group on campus. However, since this was during and immediately after the Emergency, the Left remained extremely wary. The closest I came was an acquaintance with some older, male professors who belonged to a loosely formed socialist group. On an extremely hot afternoon in 1977, I went to the office of one to return a borrowed book, and there met Madhu Kishwar, who magnetised me the instant I saw her, and who suggested that we form a women's group.

Although I thought women's issues might be a diversion from proletarian struggle, I agreed, and we formed the group by telling friends who seemed likely to be interested. So I entered the women's movement, without knowing there was one. No doubt, in earlier years, many such groups had sprung up and died out all over India. However, this moment happened to be conducive to longer-lasting formations.

The group met every week in my room at the Miranda House hostel. 'Group' sounds more organised than it was: different women came every week, and there were only a handful of consistent attendees. We discussed books, such as Engels' *Origin of the Family*, de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*. The discussions were not very useful because almost nobody read the books through, but reading them set me on a new course of reading and thinking, as did the many eclectic conversations we had.

We invited speakers, such as Vina Mazumdar and Florence Howe, and put up handmade posters in the university; some college authorities were displeased by this use of my room. In her overview of the American women's movement, Howe gave a two-sentence account of lesbianism, which once again had the light-bulb effect, but this time in a much more personal way, as I realised this was a name for the feelings I had

expressed in poems and letters, but had not been able to connect to anyone else's experience. I began to scan bookstores and buy every book that seemed related to homosexuality; I also collected every news report, article or story I came across. Our group did not discuss the subject further, though.

We conducted a survey of men's and women's hostels on campus, to compare rules and living conditions. This involved entering men's colleges, which I had never done, and interviewing strangers, also a new experience. In 1978, the idea of starting a feminist magazine came up and I took to it with an enthusiasm born of complete naivete, having no idea that it would consume the next thirteen years of my life. For about nine months, we worked on collecting money to bring out the magazine, and also on soliciting, writing and editing articles for the first issue.

Our first office was Madhu's motorbike, on which I rode pillion, with a manual typewriter inherited from my grandfather on my lap and files in a shoulder bag. Many more women now attended meetings, which were held not only in my room, but also in other people's houses all over the city. The only absolutely consistent attendees were Madhu and me, and we also did most of the work; Bharati Sud and Shashi Shourie, lecturers at Satyawati College, and Meera Velayudhan were fairly consistent, and took on some responsibility. Many others came and went; some attended only one meeting, while others attended several; some did a few small tasks, while some took on tasks they never did. Among these women were Deepti Mehrotra, Sujatha Mathai, Aparna, Shobha Sadagopan, Indu Agnihotri, Radha Kumar, Rohini, Urvashi Butalia, Svati Joshi, Sahba Husain, Bharati Pandey and many, many others whose names I have forgotten.

In this year, I met more people from more diverse backgrounds than I ever had before, a process that would escalate over the next decade. In groups, I continued to be

almost completely tongue-tied, but I absorbed huge amounts of information, and also for the first time experienced the exhilaration of conversations connected simultaneously to ideas as well as to everyday experience. Meeting senior leaders of various political parties' women's wings, I developed the sense of a women's movement with a history dating back to the social reform and nationalist movements.

The first issue of *Manushi* appeared in January 1979, sold out almost immediately and brought letters pouring in, from women and men all over the country, expressing support and telling their life stories. We narrowly escaped a bid by some women aligned with a left-wing party to take over the magazine; this set me on the long road to realising that politics is as much, if not more, about power than it is about freedom.

Nineteen-eighty was in many ways a turning point. We attended the national women's conference in Bombay, which was rife with conflicts, both personal and ideological, and generated that peculiar mix of excitement and unpleasantness inseparable from political movements or perhaps from any large group activity. This was the year that, with much trepidation, I gave my first public speech at the March 8 rally in Delhi. But if the movement enabled some kinds of speaking, it silenced others. At the Bombay conference, when I first met an openly lesbian Indian visiting from London, I worked up the courage to tell her I was a lesbian, too. She looked bewildered, as well she might, but later told me that several women individually came out to her at the conference. Given the near-complete silence around sexuality (as distinct from sexual violence), it was easier for us to tell someone who would leave the country in a few days, than to tell each other.

In 1980, too, I saw the faces of two other Indian women who acted on the love that dared not speak its name. I remember the moment I undid the brown paper strip encircling the news tabloid *Blitz*, and the shock of seeing the photos of

two young women in Kerala, Mallika and Lalithambika, who had attempted suicide together, leaving behind their love letters. I still have that newspaper clipping, the seed of my later book, *Love's Rite*. More reports of such joint suicides appeared in subsequent months – here were women completely outside the movement waging their own battles. On the inside of my cupboard door (I didn't hear the word 'closet' until much later) in my room at the Miranda House hostel, I pinned a paper with a list of great gay people, from Plato and Sappho to Forster and Woolf. The only Indian name was Firaq Gorakhpuri; I didn't know of any others. Over the next several years, I obsessively read and reread certain books until they literally fell apart; among them were Forster's *Maurice*, Kate Millett's *Sita*, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, Mary Renault's *The Persian Boy* and *The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse*.

This year, too, I began to read both libertarian socialist critiques of Marxism (from Proudhon and Wilde to Spender and Auden), as well as histories of the Soviet Union and China; these readings, in tandem with my first-hand observation of the reductionist thinking and authoritarian behaviour of women from left-wing parties, led me away from Marxism.

A new bunch of volunteers was now working with *Manushi*, including Kumkum Roy, then a young lecturer at Delhi University; Kanchana Natarajan, who later went on to teach there too; G. Asha and Anju Ailawadi, students at IIT; and some students of mine from Miranda House, where departmental colleagues were now viewing me with increasing hostility, as a trouble-maker, who came to work in shabby jeans and rubber chappals, and barely exchanged the time of day with them. There was a well-orchestrated bid to oust me from my job, which I survived, thanks to a tip-off from an old teacher, and with the support of colleagues from other

departments. Ironically, by the time my department turned to a mix of Marxist, feminist and deconstructionist theory, and became the vanguard on campus in this regard, I had moved on ideologically.

It is hard to convey how much of my time in the movement was spent doing tedious work of various degrees of mindlessness, like addressing and stamping (over the years) hundreds of thousands of envelopes and postcards; editing, translating, typing and proofreading badly written articles and reports, so that by the time an issue of *Manushi* appeared, I had read everything in it a dozen times over and practically knew it by heart; typing out routine replies to letters of enquiry; answering the same questions, posed by visitors and journalists, Indian and foreign, who came to the office (does religion – read Hinduism and Islam – cause the oppression of women? Does dowry cause the oppression of women?); and making endless cups of tea.

And yet somehow, we managed to do all this, and still chat, laugh, flirt, stay up all night writing, go to late-night Hindi movies and drive around the city, three on a motorbike, singing film songs. For several years, I taught five days a week and spent every other waking hour working at *Manushi*, barely sleeping, and living largely on dal and rotis from the local tandoor, eggs and whatever other concoction we rustled up with no knowledge of cooking.

Manushi also introduced me to Hindi cinema. As a teenager, I had seen a few movies on television in neighbours' homes, of which *Anand* was the most memorable. The first I saw in a theatre was *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, when I was twenty. At *Manushi*, we went to movies primarily to review them; I thus saw most of the major hits and also several bad movies of the 1980s. I learnt a repertoire of film songs, especially older ones, which Madhu loved to sing. Until then, my imagination was shaped by hundreds of English poems I

knew by heart; film songs were now added to the mix, immersing me in mainstream Indian culture.

In the early Eighties, *Manushi* was run out of the two-room apartment Madhu and I shared, and there were generally several other women sleeping over. In addition to bringing out the magazine and organising protest demonstrations on our own or with other women's groups, we also had discussions among the volunteers on many issues, including personal lives, family lives and sexuality. In one meeting, we examined our bodies with speculums; in another, we presented personal narratives.

Manushi took no institutional funding or commercial advertising but, drawing on some large individual donations and on our own salaries, we managed to hire one employee, Kusum Kohli, a former factory worker, who continued to work on and off for decades, and who also participated in discussions. This phase generated a great deal of emotional intensity and several volatile love-hate relationships, which exploded into conflict. Volunteers left and were replaced by others, and *Manushi* began a gradual process of becoming institutionalised. Over the years, we hired more workers, among whom were Uma and Prabha (whose last names I forget), Usha Gohri, Indrani Mukherjee and Soma Swaroop. There were several other shorter-lived ones as well; one was a neighbour's unhappy daughter-in-law.

Madhu and I moved into an apartment close to the office, and tried, rather unsuccessfully, to insulate our lives from *Manushi's* life. We still worked seven days a week, with no fixed working hours. We hardly ever took a day off or a vacation, and were available on the phone and in person, at almost any hour of day or night, to women in distress and their families, visiting activists, tourists and neighbours.

Since we were besieged by women suffering marital violence, we started offering legal advice, with the help of

two young lawyers, Pinky Anand and Geeta Luthra. I was deeply engaged with this aspect of our work. I read a great deal, including all the parliamentary debates from the 1950s when Hindu law was codified, and wrote many articles on the law, including a column that for a while was entitled "Our Rights and Wrongs". I even enrolled in law school, but had to drop out because I had no time to study.

Paradoxically, the Puritanism of my Christian upbringing persisted in another form while I was in the women's movement. Indian feminists at the time were strongly inclined to focus on what we middle-class women saw as the issues of 'less fortunate' women, namely, dowry, rape, wife-beating, wife-murder, sati, infanticide. *Manushi* was among the earliest to study inheritance and property rights, in particular land rights, and also the scarcity of resources, such as water, fuel, fodder and food, which created a double work load for poor women. But any attempt to talk about issues related to our own lives was seen as self-indulgent, elitist and 'western'. It was generally assumed without discussion that poor women had no time or energy for sexual pleasure, emotional complications or individual development.

This meant that pleasure was largely displaced by work. While I was growing up, my family almost never attended weddings and celebrated no festivals; women wore no jewellery or make-up; dancing, card games, television and movies were forbidden. My primary pleasures, therefore, were reading and writing. In the women's movement, as I experienced it, things were only superficially different. In 1979, *Manushi* called on readers to boycott dowry weddings, with dowry being strictly defined. Very few responded positively; those of us who took the vow excluded ourselves from most weddings. Many of us tended to suspect jewellery, make-up and, indeed, any interest in appearance, as somehow related to women becoming sex objects.

Our neighbours in the lower-middle class, mixed Hindu-Sikh neighbourhood of Lajpat Nagar, saw us as social workers who had sacrificed our personal lives for women's welfare, and there was some truth to this perception. I not only gave up the idea of pursuing a PhD abroad, the route taken by several of my contemporaries who thereafter became international stars by constructing post-colonial feminist theory, but I also abandoned the PhD at Delhi University for which I had enrolled, because I had no time to work on it. And yet, I could have abandoned my career even more completely – at one point, I considered resigning my job and going off to become a trade unionist in Kanpur!

For a decade, I unwittingly followed Virginia Woolf's advice to women writers, by leading the life of a secular nun, celibate, putting most of my earnings into *Manushi*, with virtually no personal or social life, working for a cause not related in any immediate way to my own being. I did a lot of writing in *Manushi* anonymously or using pseudonyms. My main pleasures were writing verse, reading and conversing with friends, who were colleagues either at college or at *Manushi*.

Like a nun, too, I received an education through work and found pleasure in work. I learnt a number of invaluable skills – translation from Hindi to English and English to Hindi, interviewing people on tape, editing, proof-reading, designing page-layout, typing at high speeds, listening and counselling. My Hindi, which was earlier of the formal kind taught in schools and colleges, improved tremendously. I also learnt to write in a way that conveys complex ideas to a general audience. This turned out to be a mixed blessing in the academy, but I still consider it a valuable skill.

One of the jobs I did at *Manushi* was rewriting scholarly articles from various disciplines (by scholars like Veena Das and Alaka Basu) in language our readers could understand. I

also read huge quantities of Hindi fiction, in order to find and translate a story for each issue. This was enjoyable, and I found some little-noticed gems, like *Ek Shauhar ke Khatir* (which I translated as "All for a Husband") by Ismat Chughtai, whom we also interviewed in the same issue. Those were the days before translation studies and I honed my skills entirely through practice. It was rewarding when major writers, such as Rajendra Yadav, Mannu Bhandari and Upendranath Ashq liked my translations of their stories and asked me to translate more for them.

Like a modern, non-cloistered nun, too, I came to know the city through work. As an undergraduate student, I had taken the bus from home to college and back for three years, without ever deviating from its route or spending a night away from home. The women's movement took me to parts of the city that I would otherwise have had no occasion to visit. I spent nights at printing presses in Shahdara and Paharganj, the only woman among a dozen typesetters, as they corrected errors and rolled proof pages off the machines. I found my way by bus to far-flung residential colonies, to meet potential writers and illustrators. I spent long days interviewing a range of women, such as an activist in a slum beyond Nangloi, for our column "One of Many". In the middle of the night, I answered a phone call and went to photograph a just-murdered woman's corpse in a tiny tenement in Lajpat Nagar.

As part of small all-women teams, I made short trips to many places, such as Deorala following the famous sati case and spent weeks in tribal Jharkhand, rural Maharashtra, at an Arya Samaj women's college in Punjab and, like many others, in north and east Delhi following the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. And I learnt that men are not the only perpetrators of violence. One of the most terrifying moments I have experienced was in curfew-bound Meerut in 1987, when Prabha Rani and I, surveying post-riot damage, visited a gutted Muslim house

and were surrounded by Hindu women, demanding to know our religion, and ready to destroy our equipment and assault us. Never have I been so glad to see policemen as when two arrived and escorted us away.

I also met many remarkable women and some men, who have disappeared from, or perhaps never appeared in, the annals of the movement. Women like Kamlesh, a young Hindi-speaking divorcee from Daryaganj, whose brothers mistreated her, and who volunteered regularly in 1980. She stopped coming over and then we heard she had died and been cremated; it seemed like a family-engineered death and we felt we had erred in not keeping better track of her. I still have a photo of her with some of us, all looking impossibly young, on the railway platform, saying goodbye to Patty, a volunteer from America who had spent a year or so at *Manushi*.

In those days, cameras were few and far between, so *Manushi's* activities were barely documented, but snapshots of these women remain in my head. There was Pushpaji, an older, witty and fun-loving widow from Defence Colony, who came into her own once her depressing marriage ended, but was still somewhat tyrannised by her sons. There was Usha, a doctor in Bombay, a single woman who had devoted her life to supporting her family, who seemed to suddenly explode or implode when catalysed by contact with *Manushi*. Kiran, who ran a Hindi printing press in Patna, eloped with her woman friend Khurshid to the *Manushi* office, pursued by Khurshid's violent family. *Manushi's* landlady in Lajpat Nagar, a feisty Sikh woman, was one of our greatest supporters; she often brought food up to us and told her two young daughters to model themselves on us. Somewhat later, Charu and Minakshi, an inseparable pair of friends, volunteered for quite a while, as did Prabha Rani, who later became a lecturer at Delhi University, and Sahjo, who went on to become a film maker. It is impossible to list all the short-term volunteers from India

and abroad who worked for a few weeks or months over the thirteen years I was at *Manushi*.

My work in the movement connected directly to my teaching. I taught mostly women students and focused on gender and sexuality in English literature; some new interpretations of texts that I later wrote about, emerged in class discussions. Over the years, many students were drawn to *Manushi* through me. There was Fatima, a young woman of extraordinary intensity, who lived in Daryaganj, volunteered for a while and acted in a play, until her father threatened to have a heart attack. We went to meet her family, but though they seemed reassured, their opposition persisted and she was forced to leave. More tragically, there was Jyoti, whose rebellion against her dysfunctional family led her to drug addiction; she finally jumped to her death from Jantar Mantar. In the late Eighties, there were Poonam Kaul and Uma Tiwari, reliable volunteers.

There were also several men, even less acknowledged. The Hindi playwright, who taught us page lay-out for the first issue, when our feminist volunteer failed to show up. The American demographer who helped in numerous ways, over many years. Madhu's two brothers, always on call. Many male activists in remote regions, who wrote reports, collected subscriptions and helped with translation. I maintained a roster of volunteer translators, to whom articles were mailed out, in those pre-email days, and carried on long-hand correspondence with dozens of volunteers whom I never met in person.

Among our more enjoyable activities was a Hindi street play, *Roshni*, improvised in a workshop directed gratis by Feisal Alkazi, on *Manushi's* terrace, in one of Delhi's wonderfully sunny winters. Madhu wrote the songs; I wrote the script, based on our improvisations; and we had an ever-changing cast, which performed all over the city, from Lajpat

Nagar to Connaught Place to college campuses. I had short hair and was often mistaken for a boy on city buses, so I acted the badly-behaved prospective groom, a role I enjoyed. However, Bharati Mirchandani, a graphic artist, was inimitable in this role: her young man was dim-witted in an absurdly Wodehousian way.

Protest demonstrations were another type of performance, which sometimes brought out less desirable aspects of our personalities. I remember one in Model Town, where the husband came out of his house to argue with us and, without having planned it, I suddenly blackened his face with the brush I was using to paint slogans on his wall. This unconscionable attempt to silence him upped the level of hysteria on both sides, with some demonstrators encroaching into his yard, and we had to beat a hasty retreat before the violence became uncontrollable.

Manushi had a fraught relationship with other women's groups. On the one hand, as the only nationwide magazine, publishing virtually everyone involved with women's issues, it was indispensable, and played a major role in pushing the mainstream media as well as politicians to take women's struggles more seriously. Many women who went on to become leading feminist writers published on women's issues for the first time in *Manushi*, at our suggestion and with much help from us. Several artists, including Arpana Cour, Nilima Sheikh, Anjolie Ela Menon and Ira Roy, contributed their work to *Manushi*.

On the other hand, personality clashes and ideological differences, the former often masked by the latter, bred a great deal of conflict with other groups. Despite these conflicts, we did have friendly relations with individual women activists all around the country. Among these were Kamla Bhasin; Manimala; Pilar, a nun of Spanish origin, who lived in a tribal village in Bihar; Flavia Agnes, who first contacted us as a battered wife, but went on to become a leading feminist

lawyer; and Satyarani Chadha, who was radicalised after her daughter's murder.

Manushi tended to take controversial positions differing from those of most other women's organisations. For example, we opposed state censorship, while most organisations favoured state intervention to monitor the representation of women. In our special issue on the Shah Bano case, *Manushi* opposed the imposition of a Uniform Civil Code which, at the time, almost all women's organisations supported; *Manushi* instead advocated each community reforming its own laws based on its own liberal traditions, and individuals being allowed to choose between their community laws and the civil law. I had and still have mixed feelings on this question.

We changed our simple anti-dowry position, realising that it did not work because as long as women were disinherited by their parents in favour of their brothers, dowry was the only inheritance they received, so advising them to give it up meant impoverishing them further. Thinking and writing about these complicated questions was intellectually stimulating.

However, these debates occurred perhaps once every three to four years. The rest of the time, the women's movement, including *Manushi*, focused largely on women victims – of violence or poverty or both. After a while, this became not only emotionally but also intellectually limiting for me. Our largely unexamined compulsion not to be elitist entailed the careful tailoring of ideas, so that I felt I was mostly writing down to readers (whom we imagined, probably wrongly, to be easily shocked and unused to complex thinking) rather than for intellectual peers.

I remember colleagues at *Manushi* in the late Eighties wondering why I did not come up with more ideas for the magazine; among the reasons were internal censorship and emotional shutting-down. Leaving *Manushi* in 1991 was followed by a spurt of creativity. I completed the PhD in 1992,

published a book of poems in 1994, an academic book, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary* in 1996, and then began work with Saleem Kidwai on *Same-Sex Love in India*.

While at *Manushi*, my training in and inclination towards literary and cultural history found expression in our occasional interviews of writers like Amrita Sher-Gil and in translation of fiction and poetry. The one major exception to the overall intellectual stultification I experienced was the 1989 tenth anniversary issue (No. 50), which focused on medieval women bhakta poets. The research, reading, translation and writing I did for this issue was wonderfully fulfilling, opening up new horizons and illuminating my growing attraction to my Hindu ancestral past. I made contact with scholars and devotees, who provided information and texts. This experience prepared me for my later work on *Same-Sex Love in India*. Some work I did on goddess texts for a later issue was also enlightening.

Some big changes in my life – like becoming a vegetarian around the age of twenty-five, and returning to the Hinduism that some of my forefathers (the conversion stories are always about men; women followed in their wake) had given up a couple of generations before – happened seamlessly, without my being able to date them exactly. They occurred while I was in the women's movement but without any direct relationship to it, probably because they went against its grain, as the movement at that time tended to be generally anti-religion, specifically anti-Hindu, and largely unconcerned about animals' suffering. Like lesbianism, these dimensions of my life remained private; the personal did not become political.

From the mid-Eighties, the divide between my inner and outer lives grew increasingly painful. Later, I would learn that some leading activists in every women's group in Delhi were lesbian or bisexual. At the time, however, I felt isolated. Paradoxically, my activism in the women's movement kept me informed about the gay movement, because gay groups

abroad and in India sent materials to the *Manushi* office, but the women's movement also fostered an exaggerated fear of being labelled man-hating and westernised if we were associated with lesbianism. Once, we received a letter from a woman using the pen-name Subhaga, recounting her long-term relationship with her female lover, though both were married. We could not publish it because she refused to give her name or address, and we had a policy forbidding publication of anonymous materials. This seemed to symbolise the strange presence and absence in which I existed.

The fear of being branded westernised was ironic for many reasons, not least because *Manushi's* survival largely depended on the higher-priced foreign subscriptions, especially institutional ones, and donations from foreign supporters, enhanced by the favourable foreign exchange rate. Over the years, many western as well as NRI women volunteered at *Manushi*, some for a few days, some for many months. We also regularly sold *Manushi* abroad; I attended the 1985 international women's conference in Nairobi and the 1986 Frankfurt Book Fair which focused on Indian writers; both trips were extended, with Madhu and I speaking at meetings organised by women's groups in England, France and Germany. In London, I made my own field trips to Gay's the Word bookstore and the gay disco, Heaven. Madhu made many more trips abroad to garner support.

In 1987, by responding to a letter in *Trikone*, the South Asian LGBT magazine from San Francisco, I got in touch with some gay men in Delhi. Fortunately for me, two of them, Suresh and Sanju, lived in Jangpura, a five-minute walk from the *Manushi* office. Here, my inner life finally found some kind of objective correlative, with a couple of evenings each month spent in the company of these men and their friends. From this emotional space grew some of the most important relationships in my life and also most of my later activism and writing. But that is another story.



Norma Alvares is an advocate of the Bombay High Court and an activist and campaigner on social and environmental issues of public concern. During the past two decades, she has argued, pro bono, over a hundred public interest litigation cases on social and environmental issues. Norma is also a well-known animal welfare activist and has helped establish several animal shelters in Goa. For her work in relation to the protection of the environment, women's empowerment and animal welfare, she has received several accolades, including the Padma Shri from the Government of India in 2002, and the Yashadhamini Puraskar from the Government of Goa in 2003. She is founder trustee of the Other India Bookstore, an NGO initiative that markets alternative ideas. She lives in Parra, a village in Goa, together with her husband and their three sons.

Learning on the Job

NORMA ALVARES

I imagine I might have been a feminist even before I knew what the word meant. I recall myself being independent-minded, resolute, determined to achieve my goals and always proud and happy to be a girl. The idea that to be born a girl was in any way a handicap was something that never crossed my mind. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that my mother was fiercely independent as well. Having been denied a college education by her parents solely on account of being a girl, she decided to ensure that her two daughters got all the opportunities and education they desired. So my sister and I grew up well-educated, multi-talented and professionally equipped to take up careers of our choice.

Frankly, while studying in Bombay – first at the neighbourhood girls' convent school, and later at a college for women – I didn't have much occasion to observe or experience practices or conduct that explicitly discriminated against women. Perhaps I wasn't observant enough. Of course, I was generally conscious that most parents pursued the education of their sons with much greater vigour than that of their daughters, and that poor scores in class were often adequate reason to discontinue a girl's education, relegate her to doing household chores and learning 'women's skills'. But I do not recall participating in the activities of any women's NGOs

during the 1960s and early 1970s, which is around the time I completed my formal education.

After my marriage to Claude Alvares, I moved from Bombay to Goa, to an extremely remote rural area, Thane village in Sattari taluka. It was here for the first time – while interacting with village folk on the farm where I lived with my family, and during regular visits to their homes – that I became acutely conscious of the discrimination that women face at home and in the workplace. It was very clear that, among the villagers I was working with, a male child was greatly preferred by the family and a girl seen as a burden. Poorly educated, sent to work in the fields from a very young age where they learnt to accept wages much lower than their male counterparts, married off when barely in their teens to men sometimes much older (and sometimes with previous marital experience), pregnancies one after another, abortions by quacks to get rid of unwanted conceptions, beaten by drunken husbands – every discriminatory practice against women sanctioned by patriarchal society was starkly visible in practically every household with which I interacted.

What is worse, I observed that the women themselves matter-of-factly accepted their lot as Fate. I thought I must help to make a difference.

At that time, a fledgling women's organisation, Bailancho Saad, had recently been formed in the capital city of Panjim. The issue it was campaigning against at the time centred around the derogatory portrayal of Goan women in Indian films and advertisements of the tourism industry. This image of Goan women as 'westernised' and, therefore, with loose morals, was heightened even further during Carnival, a popular three-day Goan festival of general merriment. During this time, thousands of tourists descend on this tiny state, many with wild visions of Goan women just waiting to let their hair down and welcome strangers.

I joined the protest and found spirited and gutsy young women in the NGO, determined to fight for dignity and a fair deal for women. The Carnival protest received support from many quarters, including the Church (a fairly powerful force in Goan society), and the government was eventually forced to clamp down on displays of scantily-dressed women on the much-decorated Carnival floats and parade. The groundwork for the nascent feminist movement in Goa had been laid.

Other campaigns followed. We took up pleas for help from women, some of them fairly well-educated, who had run away from their marital homes due to incessant demands for more dowry from their in-laws, only to find that they were not welcome back in their natal homes either. It was quite clear that although – thankfully – there were no cases of dowry death or bride-burning in Goa compared to other parts of India, the practice of dowry was very much entrenched and alive despite the state being relatively progressive in many ways, and its people considered generally literate.

An opportunity to assist Muslim women in Goa arose when a proposal was made from orthodox Muslim quarters to adopt Muslim Personal Law for Muslims in Goa, replacing the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) then in force in the state. This progressive code, in effect since pre-liberation times, is one of the noteworthy contributions of the Portuguese colonial regime to Goa. Besides drawing a clear distinction between religious practice and civil law, the UCC also bestows equal rights on women in matters of marriage, property and inheritance.

Muslims are a fairly small community in Goa. However, Muslim women were extremely agitated when they heard about the proposal to apply the Shariat to their community. Some of them approached local feminist organisations for support, and we took the opportunity to organise several meetings in order to provide a platform for our Muslim sisters to voice their concerns. Many of them were speaking in public

for the first time and the fervour and eloquence with which they canvassed their cause was edifying and inspiring. All thoughts of jettisoning the UCC were quietly laid to rest.

When a tobacco company introduced a cigarette brand labelled *Ms*, specifically targeted to women, we were immediately incensed. 'Ms' was the prefix feminists across the world were choosing to replace more traditional nomenclatures (Miss/Mrs. or Kum./Smt.) which, besides denoting the female persona, essentially indicated a woman's marital status as well. That a tobacco company should choose this very symbol of the liberated woman to entice women into compromising their health was most insulting and we felt that it defeated the very purpose of women's emancipation.

The advertisement in question portrayed a stylish young woman lighting up a cigarette with a self-assured and confident look, intended to show how liberated she was. Well, this was certainly not the kind of liberation women were looking for. We decided to launch a huge campaign to highlight the evils of smoking, to protest cigarette advertising and to condemn the product. We moved to openly deface the huge billboards advertising the cigarette. I remember how, in the company of others, I climbed a ladder to hurl paint across a billboard and to deface it in full public view. Vandalism it no doubt was, but the motive was entirely laudable and this novel action got our protest instant attention. The NGO received a number of congratulatory messages for its bold stand and, shortly thereafter, the cigarette brand was withdrawn.

I remained very active in the women's movement in Goa for around a decade in the Eighties and early Nineties, regularly participating in all campaigns, meetings, dharnas and protests. I saw the women's movement grow stronger, both in terms of the number of women who joined and the number of feminist organisations that were established in the state. Initially, the NGOs were comprised chiefly of educated women, mostly

single and young, many in service employment, and some students. When the NGOs campaigned on issues like dowry, eve-teasing, sex pre-selection, wife-beating, and so on, there were always murmurs in society about the feminist movement being elitist, restricted to towns and cities; about the women being home-breakers and man-haters. Naturally, not everyone held such opinions, but there is no doubt that they existed and were unashamedly voiced.

Gradually, however, as the NGOs began to take these issues into rural areas and discuss them with village women, their composition itself changed and a larger number of women from rural areas, many of them married, were seen participating in demonstrations on women's issues. The movement for equality for women in society and for calling a halt to violence against women had taken root. When, in 1989, the speaker of the Goa assembly was accused of molesting a young female government employee (barely in her early twenties), Goan society's outrage was instantaneous and the speaker was forced to resign. In the assembly elections that followed a few months later, women's organisations decided to campaign against his candidature. It must have been the only time in Goan electioneering when a campaign was specifically directed *against* a candidate, and not in favour of anyone. He lost.

I believe that it is the wide-ranging, late-evening discussions that the NGOs held from time to time with groups of village women on issues that mattered to the latter (whether it was drunken husbands or restrictive religious rituals, property issues or bigamy), their serious and committed efforts to understand the concerns of ordinary women and make those concerns the agenda of the NGO itself, that paved the way for the extension of the women's movement to practically every nook and corner of Goa.

A good case in point is Tivrem village where women had

already had enough of drunken menfolk abusing them and squandering the family's hard-earned wages on liquor purchases in town on payday. The women were, therefore, furious when word got around that permission was likely to be granted for a bar to be opened in the village itself. They were fearful for their families but at their wits' end on how to deal with the problem. The NGOs decided to assist them by making sure that their objections to the bar license were heard by the appropriate authorities. This required skill in drafting formal memoranda. When the authorities confessed to the women that they sympathised with them but were helpless in the matter – there being no legal grounds on which they could reject the application – the women decided to go on the offensive with demonstrations, protests and appeals going right up to the chief minister. The bar license issue, though unplanned, soon became a serious item on the agenda of the movement simply because it was important to the women in Tivrem.

The discussions that took place while planning strategy, raising funds, garnering support from other organisations and campaigning became a vital part of the learning process; subsequently, several other problems related to women's welfare took centre-stage from time to time. Incidents like rape and unwanted pregnancies led to discussions on amniocentesis and sex pre-selection; surreptitious or forcible abortions led to discussions on pro-life issues and the neglected state of women's health; the drying up of springs and depletion of water in wells became the means to explain complex issues of development and urbanisation; the shortage of firewood led to discussions on fuel-efficient chullas and government subsidies for those who wanted to use them; and so on.

Moreover, subjects that were hitherto taboo in village circles – like molestation by close family members – were openly discussed at meetings and women gradually began to

· speak their minds and relate their experiences. Soon they realised that they were not the cause of the ills that often befell them and their families. They recognised the need for solidarity and the importance of giving one's time to build the movement. As a result, these village women remain staunch supporters and vocal members of the feminist movement in Goa till today.

By the end of the Eighties, I had done two things with my life. I had acquired a law degree and a *sanad* (license) to practise law. I was now an advocate. At the same time, I had also founded, together with like-minded friends, an institution known as the Other India Bookstore (OIB), whose purpose was to source and market literature from the 'other India': in other words, books promoting alternative thinking. Advocacy and marketing books are entirely diverse and unconnected activities, and they would have remained so but for the fact that, in my case, both stemmed from the same concern: one, to advance the cause of those who had been relegated to the margins, chiefly on account of the choices made by this country in its quest for development and progress; and two, to find and propagate ways of living and working that are in harmony with nature. For the past two decades I have been trying to do just this.

Through OIB we promoted the small-scale publications of activist groups on social issues, the environment, alternative medicine, feminist writing, radical literature from the countries of the South – Asia, Africa, Latin America. These publications had remained inaccessible to the public at large, simply because they were thought to have no market value and so were never stocked by commercial bookstores. At OIB we set out to change that. We set ourselves up as a mail order bookstore and, through our catalogues and India's efficient postal system, were able to reach customers in the remotest corners of the country.

Many NGOs were instantly attracted to OIB. In its early days, the newly founded feminist publisher, Kali for Women, and the only women's bookshop in India, Streelekha, were among our closest collaborators. OIB was not a feminist bookshop but we always stocked and promoted feminist writing, and even participated in a couple of national bookfairs, sharing stall space with these two organisations. I recall other publishing houses headed by women or having women in major decision-making positions – like Seagull, Tara, Tulika, Earthcare – as among those that OIB worked with right from the start. Obviously, my feminist leanings and the warm friendship I shared with the women who headed these institutions influenced and affected the way OIB functioned.

My legal work began as a part-time activity, but it soon took centre-stage and today legal matters occupy much of my time. I appear only in Public Interest Litigations (PILs), chiefly in the Bombay High Court at Goa and sometimes at the Supreme Court in Delhi. I argue all PILs *pro bono* for Goa's NGOs and citizens' groups and work chiefly on environmental issues. I also argue cases to halt cruelty to animals and take up cases of human rights violations and PILs to enforce the rights of women and children.

I started law practice entirely on my own. I have never interned with any legal firm nor have I received any formal training in either drafting briefs or arguing cases in court. Strictly speaking, it was trial and error from the start and I learnt the ropes on the job. However, I did have one role model: an eminent senior counsel at the Supreme Court, whose methods of preparing and presenting a case I have greatly admired and consciously tried to emulate in my practice in more ways than one. She is Indira Jaising, presently additional solicitor general, the first woman to be appointed to this prestigious post in India.

It is my good fortune to have been able to associate with

Indu (as her friends call her) over the past two decades, initially when she would come to Goa to appear for the environment organisation I am associated with, and later on the several occasions when she appeared in the Supreme Court on behalf of NGOs I had represented at the High Court. Working with her gave me the opportunity to observe – almost in awe – her sharp and precise dissection of the issues involved in the brief; the close attention she paid to the views of the NGO (lawyers are notorious for ignoring lay people's opinions); the firmness with which she explained to the client what aspects she could argue and what was irrelevant or based on incorrect legal assumptions; and finally, the clarity with which she delivered her arguments in court. Win or lose, her dedication to the task is truly inspiring. This, I realised, is what is expected of an advocate and what brings satisfaction to the NGO, even if one cannot always bring home a joyful verdict. Therefore, I cannot write about my legal work without paying tribute to, and acknowledging with gratitude, the influence that Indira Jaising has had on my life and my legal practice.

The PILs I have argued have related to practically the entire gamut of environmental issues that have been discussed and debated in public fora in Goa; these include: the protection of forests and coastal areas; the preservation of important coastal assets such as sand dunes, mangroves and fisheries; preventing the contamination of fresh water aquifers, lakes and rivers; ensuring the enforcement of village and town planning regulations; prohibiting industrial pollution; calling to account the authorities responsible for protecting the environment; and so on. I have rarely had routine, run-of-the-mill cases and I have learnt much, both about old science and new technologies, being personally enriched in knowledge with every case.

The opposition has usually been formidable because

invariably the violators are influential and powerful people: those who can bend the law, have enormous clout and come equipped with overt or covert government backing. There have been occasions when they have even succeeded in getting the law changed midway during court proceedings (and, sometimes, after as well) to ensure that their development plans did not go awry. This has left me completely stumped. But equally often I have triumphed and rejoiced with my fellow Goans in our victory.

Legal work has been compelling not only because one has to face the rigorous demands of law, but also because one must develop special skills, including clarity of thought, the ability to fine tune one's arguments, and maintain calmness and presence of mind in court. Plus, of course, the stamina to last the course! Working in my chosen area has also given me an insight into the dark and murky side of law – how rules and regulations are sometimes framed keeping vested interests in mind and how, while the law is ostensibly equal for all, the affluent and powerful are often better served than ordinary folk.

The legal retinues that my opponents brought to court would often fill half the court room! This was sometimes intimidating but, although I argued alone, I never felt alone because I have always had my husband, Claude, as a working partner in legal matters. Claude is the director of the environmental organisation whose cases I have often represented. Since we got married some thirty years ago, we have, in fact, worked as a team on the many projects we have undertaken and it has been no different with legal work. We have spent days and nights preparing cases, researching data, strategising tactics and finding legal arguments to canvass in our shared commitment to defend Mother Earth. Altogether, it has been an exhilarating experience.

While, strictly speaking, environmental issues are distinct

from what are generally perceived as 'women's issues', I have always believed that protecting the environment is really tantamount to saving ourselves. In this sense, environmental issues must also be women's issues. This planet will survive without us, but can we survive if the air we breathe is poisoned, the water we drink is polluted or altogether depleted and the earth that we rest on is so degraded that it can no longer produce food that is fit for consumption? The consequences of environmental degradation are very serious and impact upon all human beings but, by virtue of the pivotal role that women play in home-making, they bear the brunt of it much more than men. Routine tasks such as fetching water and fuelwood, preparing food and caring for young ones increase a woman's work manifold once environmental degradation sets in, and will leave her even more fatigued and malnourished than she is today.

It's no wonder therefore that a gradual transformation has taken place in the causes that the women's movement now espouses: development and environmental issues are often lead items on the agendas of feminist organisations. This is certainly true in Goa where some women's rights activists are at the forefront of mass movements and campaigns for rethinking the direction in which the state is headed. These movements are advocating responsible development, be it in industry, tourism or housing, and are urging the government to adopt a development policy that is in sync with the aspirations of the people, as expressed through gram panchayats and village-level bodies throughout the state.

Local self-governing institutions have become increasingly active with 33 per cent reservation for women. More women are entering the political arena and I believe that they are making subtle but important changes at the local level, including in the agendas of local political bodies, which hitherto were almost exclusively a male preserve.

While initially feminists campaigned strictly on issues that concerned the welfare of women, we are now also invited to speak on general issues from a feminist perspective. Planning and development, tourism, golf courses, casinos, water shortage, mining, healthcare – all these hotly debated issues have received serious inputs from women's groups. The feminist movement has gained confidence and no longer wishes to confine itself to discussing 'women's issues' alone. Looked at from another angle, *all* issues have become women's issues.

I am also an animal rights activist and a campaigner for animal welfare; when I am not in court, I am usually preoccupied with ensuring that the different animal shelters in Goa are being run smoothly. I got involved with animal welfare purely by chance some eighteen years ago, as a result of a request from that champion of animal causes, Maneka Gandhi. She wanted me to help a young woman set up an NGO for animal welfare activities in Goa. In the process I not only got involved, I also got hooked. I guess that's because the environment and animals are so closely linked that it's impossible to work for one and not be moved by the other. Working in the animal welfare field has taken away whatever little leisure time I could have set aside for myself. But I don't regret this choice for a moment, because working with and for animals has opened up a whole new world to me and gives me a great deal of satisfaction, if only because animals are so appreciative of this attention.

To return to the women's movement. One aspect that may be of interest to the reader is the style of functioning adopted by some women's groups in Goa. Very early on in its history, Bailancho Saad decided to be a non-hierarchical organisation, loosely bound, where women could freely express themselves and organise their activities. There were no membership fees or even a clear definition of who could become a member. The group did not register itself as an

NGO, deliberately. Our meetings were entirely informal and no minutes were recorded for approval at the next meeting. There was no managing committee and no spokesperson appointed to issue statements on its behalf or to control the direction it took. While this may appear to be a disadvantage in terms of organisation-building, this form of operation was a decision consciously taken; what's more, it worked very well for us. The advantage of this arrangement was that it made it very easy for women to become a part of the feminist movement. It enabled them to come and go freely and not feel bound by rules and restrictions. Any woman who felt concerned enough could attend the weekly meetings and consider herself a member. She continued to remain a member until she herself decided (if at all) that she wanted no more part in the organisation. It is for this reason that most of us who came together in those early years continue to consider ourselves members even if we have subsequently left Goa or stopped being active participants in Bailancho Saad's programmes.

Not having to sign a membership form is a very important consideration if one recognises that women are usually obliged to disclose, at least to their close family members, any commitments they have made outside the home and any monies spent. We felt that women should not be burdened any more than they already are as a result of choosing to be part of a forum for women, and that the meetings of the organisation should be a source of strength for them, rather than an occasion for guilt.

In retrospect, this proved to be a wise decision. It enabled the organisation to expand without ever having to organise a membership drive. It ensured democracy and fairplay in decision-making and in the choice of issues that were taken up. Eventually, Bailancho Saad did officially register itself and it now has the formal trappings of a managing committee,

etc., but these have remained procedural issues – the method of operation continues to be informal.

The issue of domestic violence, which has been one of the focal points of the feminist movement for the past few years, led me to becoming active in women's issues once again, though in a different way. This time my involvement was not restricted to Goa. As a trustee of the Lawyers Collective – the NGO which pioneered domestic violence legislation in India – it was my privilege to be able to participate actively in a number of consultations held across the country with feminists and women's organisations to draft the proposed law. Listening to women passionately discuss and debate controversial clauses, painstakingly scrutinise minute details and mundane provisions and repeatedly revise drafts so as to incorporate all viewpoints and arrive at a consensus was a truly satisfying experience. This novel experiment of nationwide consultation bore good results, for when the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) was finally enacted by parliament in November 2005, the feminist movement was already geared up to implement this vital legislation. The PWDVA forced society to acknowledge that women in this country are indeed victims of violence in that most sacred of places – their homes.

Although the police still try to turn a woman back when she complains of harassment or ill-treatment in the home, there is no doubt that thanks to the wide publicity generated and the efforts made by civil society and the government, there is awareness of the PWDVA and its implications. Educational institutions, government departments and judicial organisations, among others, have been holding seminars and workshops on the PWDVA to disseminate information about the manner of its implementation and to encourage women to take advantage of its provisions to get relief when faced with violence in the home. Recognising that even young girls need

to be aware that they need not feel ashamed to speak up if violence is done to them in the home, schools and parent-teacher associations have taken it upon themselves to organise group discussions, role-playing, etc., in order to make girls aware of the remedies that are available to them.

Of course, one cannot conclude that the crimes-against-women graph has plunged with all the legislation and infrastructure that is now in place. My own state, Goa, has repeatedly been in the national news over the past couple of years for sexual crimes against women and children. While the high profile cases concern foreign tourists, there have been equally, if not more, serious cases of serial rapes and murders of local women, investigation of which proceeds at a slow pace.

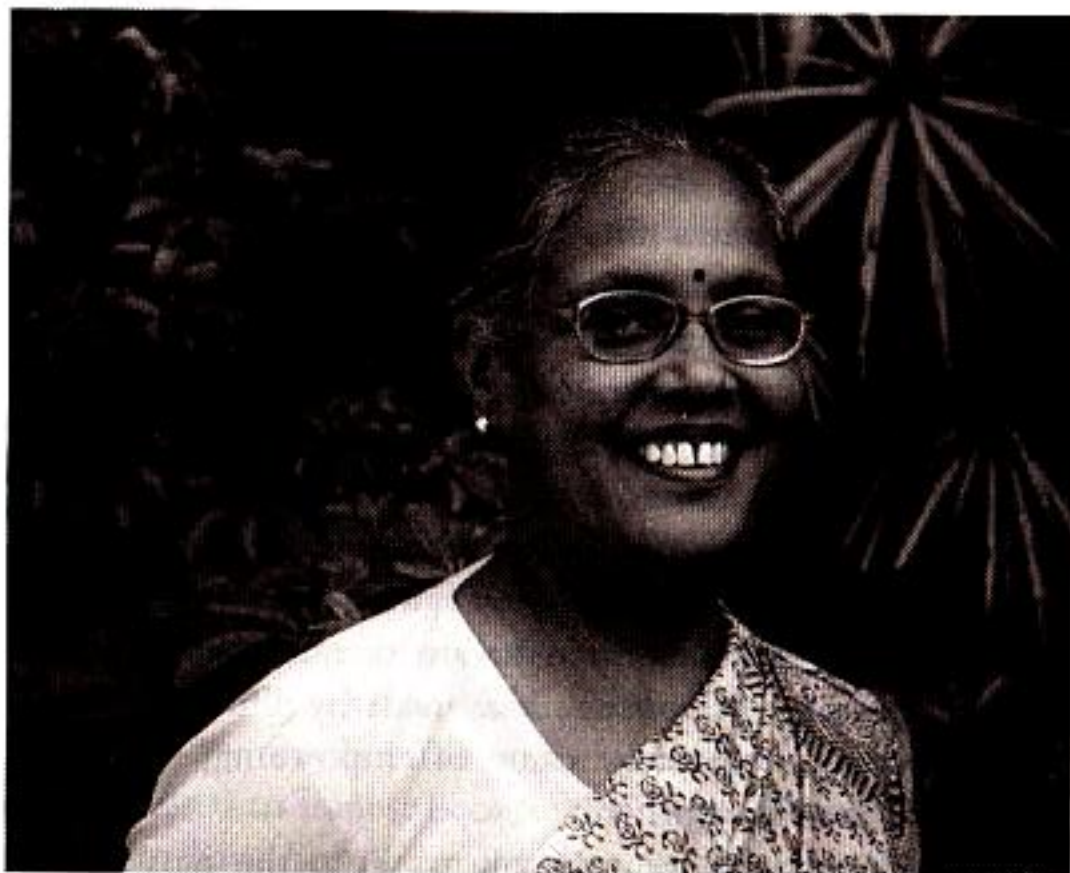
Has my involvement with the women's movement had a major impact on my personal life? If I were to claim that I am what I am today only because of the women's movement, this would be less than honest because it is simply not true. I was fortunate to have been born into a home where women are respected and treated on par with male members of the family. I am equally fortunate to have married a man who has the finest regard for women, and our relationship has been one of equal partnership all the way. Yet, I must acknowledge that being a part of the women's movement has affected me at a very fundamental level and it has had a deep impact on my personality. Listening to women recount their personal life stories, the trials and tribulations they have undergone, their heroic efforts to cope with everyday routines, especially the demands of growing children, while at the same time trying to find a measure of peace and solace in the midst of domestic strife and tension, has been a humbling experience for someone like myself who did not find herself in similar circumstances and has never known such adversity.

There has also been the joy of being part of the sisterhood

of womankind – the extended community of women. The laughter and vivaciousness that accompanied the discussions at most of our meetings, the exhilaration we all felt after a successful campaign, the disappointment when yet another obstacle was thrown our way – all this made for a lasting bond, easy to evoke even years later.

Nothing illustrates this better than the Women's Day celebrations organised in Goa every year on March 8. The event is always remarkable because it is so different from other public gatherings and meetings. There is neither the sombre, grim, intellectual posturing of seminars and conferences, nor the shrill haranguing peculiar to political meetings. Instead, the March 8 celebration, usually held in a public maidan, is characterised by bursts of singing, dances, skits, debates, speeches, even karate demonstrations! It's a unique expression of contributions made by different women to the occasion and to the cause of empowering women in every situation, everywhere.

In such matters, we must always keep the plus side in mind, which is that the socio-political milieu has changed and that women have been an active part of that changing. Without our getting together, there would have been no change. While obviously there is no end-of-the-road success that we can celebrate, there can be a legitimate sense of pride and achievement, simply because without funding, without huge organisational structures, simply by being and working together, we have managed to dramatically alter our perceptions of ourselves and of what we can do, even if we have not yet succeeded in transforming our world.



Nalini Nayak is based in Kerala and has been involved with coastal communities and their issues for over three decades. She is a founder member of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, where she has taken the initiative to collectively evolve a feminist perspective in fisheries. She is presently general secretary of the Self Employed Women's Association, Kerala, of which she was a joint founder. She is particularly concerned with issues of women workers in the unorganised sector.

Stimulating Years, One Doesn't Stop Learning

NALINI NAYAK

WHEN Ritu sent me a mail asking me to write about my involvement with the women's movement for this book, I was quite excited – not because I was being asked to write, but because a group of women were going to write their stories and I was really keen to learn how different women have swum in the various streams that make up the flow of this large and diverse movement, these past twenty-five odd years. This movement, with its numerous facets, its outstanding protagonists, its mass jamborees and serious conferences, its songs and theatre, rancour and confusions, splits and solidarities, has stimulated me intensely and given my life and work purpose, hope and joy. It has also been a great means of national integration, making us all more sensitive to the ways in which caste, class and geographical location divide us, and in some ways it has also helped us bridge these differences.

Although I was born and raised in Bangalore, I have lived my working life in Kerala, based in Trivandrum. This life has revolved/evolved around two major movements: the fishworkers' and the women's movements. Both have led me through a range of related subjects, understanding myself as a woman and the way I see and do things in relation to the men I work with; the complex relations between human

dynamics and the environment in the context of modern science and use of technology; the otherwise unspoken complexities of sexuality and religion and the way they shape our thinking and interactions; besides, of course, the new knowledge of the otherwise forgotten or deliberately suppressed role that women have played in the development of society and how overarching patriarchy has appropriated it all. All these discoveries and experiences have simultaneously filled me with wonder, made me seethe with anger, stimulated me to react and deepen my social involvement, linked me with others whose commitment and vision have inspired me, widened my horizons and, finally, filled me with humility as time keeps advancing, creating a history of which I do not feel a part.

I had already been living and working in the fishing community for over a decade before I became a feminist. It's not that I wasn't working with women specifically in the community, helping them organise – working in a mixed team that had helped build a successful cooperative movement among fisherfolk, I was very convinced that women in the community occupied a significant space and needed to be organised as women, as well. There were many firsts in this organising initiative – women on church committees; the local women's organisation running the village ration shop and controlling cash offerings at the prayer shrine; and women organising to demand the right to travel on state transport buses instead of walking miles to the market with their fish. I didn't really understand what more there was to 'women's empowerment' as I felt the women we worked with were an integral and important part of the fishing economy and had begun to take matters into their own hands. I also didn't think it was important to participate in the first meeting of the autonomous

women's organisations as I had questions about the very concept, 'autonomous'. We were living and working in a mixed team of men and women, building up a process in the fishery where both participated. So what more? Moreover, we were in Kerala, a highly politicised state where autonomous groups and movements were not only almost non-existent but also highly suspect. Better to keep away from such 'autonomous' outfits. I did, however, participate in a women's discussion group called Prachodana in Trivandrum where we read and discussed various books – *The Family* by Engels, *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, all of which I found very interesting.

In 1980 I took up a full-time job as a social worker in a high-specialty hospital. This was my first regular job and for the first time I was being confronted by other women and men about my status as a single woman: why didn't I wear a chain around my neck, why did I walk so fast, didn't I have parents? – implying that they should have seen to it that I was married off by the ripe old age of thirty-two! These stereotypical questions didn't put me off; what really shook me were other questions from women activists who met me through my fisheries work: "Why do you think women should not fish?", "Why do Christians call God Father/Lord?"

It was only in 1985, I think, when I participated in a discussion in Bombay where Chhaya Datar presented the work she had done at the Institute of Social Studies (The Hague), that things changed for me. Presenting her study of the Nippani workers, conceptualising women's exploitation, she analysed the concept of patriarchy as a category with a material base, operating to the disadvantage of women in all the institutions that make up society. Being analytical myself and having used the Marxist social analysis framework developed by François Houtart and Geneviève Lemercinier, this hit me like a great flash of light. Eureka! I could not stop

my mind whirling as I saw all our work in fisheries in a new light – how patriarchy not only controlled women through all the social institutions, but also basically controlled their labour. Yes, it made sense. Though there were a number of blank spaces and doubts, the desire to struggle through them was strong because I had understood the logic. There was no turning back now.

I shared all this with my women colleagues – Aleyamma Vijayan, Mercy Alexander, Vanitha Mukherjee, to name a few – insisting that we organise a discussion in order to understand patriarchy. Though some of them were skeptical, we decided to invite Chhaya, Gabriele Dietrich and Nandita Gandhi to Trivandrum to expose the others, including our male friends, to a session on patriarchy. That session changed the thinking of my women colleagues, and from then on we worked with a totally different consciousness, began to engage much more politically in our work with women. Although it took us a while (we kept distinguishing ourselves from liberal feminists), we finally became quite unapologetic about saying, “yes we are feminist.” Subsequently, we reflected on our work from the perspective of our new consciousness and collectively published these reflections in a little booklet called *A Struggle Within the Struggle*. We updated this account in 1991 and then, when things came full circle by the end of the millennium, we decided that we would revise it further to address our work and growing consciousness as feminists in the fishworkers’ movement at the local, national and international levels. Unfortunately, the revision has not materialised fully.

It was very clear that patriarchy operates in very concrete ways and with great disadvantage not only to women, but to nature. With all the examples we had from the field, we were able to further develop a Marxist analytical framework by

introducing the categories of patriarchy, ecology and caste that had not found a place in it earlier. Analysing the development of fisheries and the government’s role through the introduction of technology and a sexual division of labour that made the powerful even more powerful gave us much to chew on. We could make very clear connections between violence against women and the growing violence in the fishery with men in full control of the tools of production, both physically and in the fishing per se – all licensed rape.

It wasn’t always smooth sailing. Although we achieved quite a bit in terms of mobilisation and global awareness of the viability of small-scale fishery, actually working in the fishing community threw up all the caste and class contradictions between us. While this was certainly a learning experience for me, I also saw how class, caste and patriarchy collude in various contexts, painfully marginalising women and derailing attempts to achieve social equity and natural justice.

It is through the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) that we have been able to go further with developing the feminist perspective in fisheries. Even before the formal process of globalisation commenced, fisheries were already globalised. As the developed world’s model was being thrust down our throats, the Indian fishworkers’ movement was on the march to resist it. At ICSF, we tried to facilitate links among small fishers around the world, all of whom were being affected by this paradigm of development. I worked specifically on women’s issues in fisheries, worldwide, understanding and drawing attention to how such a paradigm was actually patriarchal in character. In India, a group of us analytically examined women in fisheries around the Indian coast which revealed several examples of how the patriarchal model of development marginalised women, even as fishery was modernising and the economy was supposed to be growing

rapidly. Modern fishing technology destroyed life in the sea and, consequently, destroyed lives and livelihood on shore. The more money that was needed to keep the fishery going, the more aggressive did fishers become, both at home and at sea. As a result, dowries crept into fishing communities and increased excessively. We took these findings to the fishworkers' movement and tried to make a case for raising demands that would safeguard women's place in the fisheries. Some demands were taken up, others rejected outright.

In the early 1990s, we developed a Women in Fisheries (WIF) programme through ICSF, with the objective of assisting women in different parts of the world to put their issues on the agendas of fishworker organisations – not just to increase their numbers in decision-making bodies, but also to protect their space in the fishery itself. It was clear that modern fisheries development automatically ousted women from the fishery, while at the same time destroying fish resources. Earlier, there had been a complementary division of labour, with men catching the fish and women processing and converting it into cash for other needs in traditional communities. Fishing gear was selective and seasonal, respecting the life pattern of fish. In contrast, modern fishing equipment just plundered the sea and modern infrastructure discriminated against women. The concluding workshop of the first phase of this programme ended with the slogan "Without Women in Fisheries, **No** Fish in the Sea". This had an impact, and the fact that academics like Barbara Nies, Siri Gerard and the Pacific Women's Network (to name a few in the West) simultaneously studied women in fisheries meant that there was now more detailed research on women in fisheries, worldwide.

Interactions with women in fisheries and academics in the developed world helped me understand the links between technology, trade and environmental politics that were pushing

for a globalised economy. I met several very articulate fisherwomen in the process. I recall the struggle of Donna Lewis, a mussel gatherer in the Maritimes Province of Canada, explaining how they were being deprived of their livelihood by the levies and taxes the government forced them to pay, on the one hand, and by recreational fishers who appropriated their space, on the other. Donna had organised women and was active in her local government, putting up a tremendous fight to remain in the fishery. The Canadian women fishers were amazingly articulate, explaining how the state marginalised them by imposing all kinds of professional demands on them, and it became clear how 'professionalisation' of the fishery had dealt the final blow to women in fisheries in the western world. Much of this was explained to me by a male colleague at ICSF, Mike Belleveau, the general secretary of the Maritime Fishermen's Union in Canada. Mike would give me a patient hearing when I raised feminist concerns and I realised gradually that his silence was not a sign of disinterest; he reflected deeply on the fishery, seeing how women strategised but also lost out. It was he who explained to me the impact of professionalisation on women when a fisherman was defined by his training, license and ownership of the craft. The marriage partner was left out, and though in reality fishing continued to be a family affair, it was ultimately associated with the person who owned the fishing license and fished. This is how women lost out, despite all the work they did managing fishing vessels from the shore, and all their other life-sustaining work in the family and community. All this got invisibilised and women's contribution to the fishery was not recognised; nor did they qualify for workers' benefits from the state. Moreover, the fishing quota system and the way it was used as a fishery management tool only privatised fish resources and, increasingly, came under the control of a few large companies.

I recall how French and Englishwomen were struggling to deal with changing EU fishery regulations while they fought for their right to be considered part of the fishing unit. They could not understand several of the regulations and by the time they did, out came some new ones! Their feeling of frustration was enormous. They had no way out. It is only now, in the 2000s, that women in the EU have raised and realised their demand that family-based fishery be recognised. Women have created several networks in Europe to make themselves heard. It has also been about a decade since several fishers' organisations have begun to be headed by women – the Comité Locale in France, for example. Even in the very macho context of Chile, where the men in the national fishers' organisation, CONAPACH, would have nothing to do with women in the 1980s, a brave and articulate woman seaweed gatherer was chosen CONAPACH president in 2007.

Over the last decade, I have withdrawn from the fishworkers' movement for reasons I have documented elsewhere,¹ although I still pursue my research on the impact of development on coastal communities. In the last major study that I undertook with two male colleagues, I made two significant discoveries which have agitated me further. The first, that a woman scholar, Patricia Hynes, reworked the I=PAT equation – commonly used in population-environment formulations, where the impact on the environment is said to be equal to the population, its affluence and technology – from a feminist perspective and introduced the category of war and military expenditure (generally unpublished data), into the equation. Hynes claims that, in fact, 'population' (denoted by P in the equation) should be replaced with 'patriarchy' to assess the actual impact on the environment.

¹ Aliou Sall, Michael Bellveau & Nalini Nayak. *Conversations: A Dialogue on Power, Intervention and Organisation in Fisheries*. Chennai: International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, 2002.

This formulation, with data to substantiate it, is what we mean when we say that the present development paradigm is violent and patriarchal, and that population growth is often blamed and used as an excuse to get away with plunder. The second discovery was that our research data indicated that with intensive capitalisation of the fishery (implying that more capital investment was required to keep fishing for smaller returns), there was a fall in the female sex ratio in coastal wards – whether in the big fisheries of Gujarat, where the community is predominantly Hindu, or in the hazardous traditional long-distance fishery of Thoothur in Tamil Nadu, where the community is predominantly Christian. Although I was familiar with this correlation in the agricultural sector, I was taken aback to find it in the fishing sector as well. Moreover, the cash-intensive Gujarat fishery showed very poor social indicators of education, health and availability of housing, water and sanitation, issues that affect women's labour the most. For someone who has spent her entire active life in this sector, this was a terrible blow.

At a more general level, I was very enthused by the contribution of the DAWN² initiative at Nairobi. Wow! The development agenda was being challenged by women in the developing world in very concrete ways, and with a focus on poor women. I recall a meeting organised by Devaki Jain in Bangalore in 1984 – it was a spirited event at which women from different backgrounds, castes and classes discussed the impact of growth-oriented development on women. The initial years of DAWN contributed substantially to such analysis and to mobilising women with an anti-patriarchy agenda. I thought that this would be taken forward in Beijing with the Forward

² Gita Sen and Caren Grown (for DAWN). *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987.

Looking Strategies, but I felt instead that the feminist agenda had been completely hijacked. While I was all for the euphoria and grand alliances that were being forged by women across race and language, I was disturbed by the focus of the Conference and what it led to subsequently. I must say I was not part of any of these international processes. I have never participated in any of the UN forums on women, sustainable development, food security, climate change, etc. I know these are complex processes and require skills of a high order and, yet, only the powerful prevail. Here again, even among the powerful, there are those women whose hearts are in the right place and they manage to remain focused. However, when women – with considerable intellectual brilliance, but no relation to or contact with a mass base – seek individual benefit and are centre-stage, the focus easily gets blurred. Developing a feminist politics one is always confronted with issues of power and of what women do in leadership roles. Power as collective strength is often defeated by the power of the individual and most women tend to succumb, like our male counterparts. I really appreciate the fact that the autonomous women's movement has tried to retain its idea of collegiality; yet, there are always some groups that want to take advantage of this because they have either more money power or more mobilising power. I do not think we have confronted this problem transparently in the women's movement, which is one reason why the massive efforts at mainstreaming women do not prepare the ground for a wider feminist politics.

When the global focus, under pressure from the World Bank, sought to undermine the role of the state and extended legitimacy to NGOs, this move, I think, altered the scenario dramatically. When I began working in a fishing village in the late 1960s, I was looked upon with disdain – no proper job, what was I doing? It was a struggle to build up people's

organisations; we worked with very little money and absolutely no status or 'designations'. Since the mid-1990s, NGOs have begun to flourish and there has been substantial money for, and recognition of, this kind of NGO professionalisation. In this century, schools of social work are springing up everywhere, with students saying they want jobs in NGOs, and with quite a number of other professionals choosing to work in NGOs. Although I am not opposed to this, as I believe there should be space for autonomous social processes, I think the biggest problem is the fact that this huge sector is accountable to no one except its funders who have their own agendas and, hence, can be very divisive, socially.

Subsequently, it was 'gender' and not 'patriarchy' that gained mileage and became a funding buzzword. The gender mela began, strengthened by post-modern debates that focused on 'identity' and 'difference'. How wonderful! So many more areas for involvement and funding, and a mushrooming of NGOs with funds and personnel that were sometimes larger than the local governments! What was frightening was that all this was happening at the same time that the World Trade Organisation (WTO) was being created and the expansion of capitalism was the global agenda – capitalism with a so-called 'human face' that NGOs would be co-opted into providing. The pieces of the jigsaw puzzle fell into place and there was vibrant activity all around – a sense that 'we have arrived'. Governments were made to toe the line as mainstreaming/malestreaming gender was a requirement with all funders, in all government programmes, opening up a huge space for gender consultants, gender trainers, gender specialists, etc. All this activity is short-term, undertaken in project mode and, therefore, only minimally challenges patriarchy per se, in development programmes. This is not to disregard the few people who actually work on gender issues in the area of food and commodity production or land and resource rights. Happily,

this breed of feminists is still around, still quite rooted. But for the majority, the emphasis is on violence against women, both at the workplace and in the domestic sphere. There has been a lot of talk about 'gender budgeting', but this is fruitful only when those who scrutinise budgets also know specific sectors in great detail and extremely well.

This phase coincided with political decentralisation and the opening up of political space to women through the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution (1993), another important milestone for women in India. Again, although this was a politically correct move, I was skeptical. It was clear by now that capitalism was in crisis and that the economy was moving increasingly into private hands. Drawing women into the political process at this time would, inevitably, increase their burden. But, as India is a place of great contradictions and surprises, the mushrooming of NGOs with a gender focus and the new political space being opened up for women saw NGOs empowering elected women representatives, on the one hand, and women being mobilised through self-help groups and other state initiatives, on the other. Seeing women advance through these processes was remarkable, and with those women's groups that had a materially feminist agenda the interventions did and do make a difference. But, for the most part, banking on women has begun in earnest even as the very basis of livelihoods – land and water resources – is up for grabs. This has upset me, as the gender discourse blinded most women to patriarchy and the violence of growth-oriented development. I know that change does not come about overnight and I am not undermining the efforts made by some in the women's movement to bring such processes on track through direct intervention. Debates and discussions have also been conducted on the Internet. Nevertheless, we must again admit that this exchange is in English, thus reflecting the ideas of a particular class of women who are certainly not

those who will stand for panchayat elections. The gaps between theory and practice are very wide; and, in the meantime, it appears that women have been drawn into the quagmire of power and party politics, established through generations of patriarchy.

In Kerala, the Stree Vedi network has made crimes against women public and lobbied for justice since the mid-1990s. It started off with great enthusiasm, post-Beijing, as the initiative of a few women like Aleyamma Vijayan, K. Ajitha, Mariamma Kalathil, M.M. Gracy and Achamma John. Despite being a rather small network, it grew to take political positions and have a voice in the public arena. Although it still exists and includes a large group of rural women, it seems to have lost its powerful public presence. This could be due to several reasons. Over the last ten years, the mobilisation of women has taken place through several forums and there are many more women's voices in the public sphere. But within Stree Vedi itself, various pressures have been divisive. An initial challenge was introduced by sexual minorities and it took a while for everyone to understand and accept this; what remains a challenge is that sexual minority groups invariably link up with sex workers and maintain that providing sexual servicing is also work. This, the majority of women in Stree Vedi do not accept, and so the network has been branded as moralistic and conservative by some.

A second divisive issue has been that of NGO profile and funding. Being part of a network implies that each group retains its identity but functions on a common platform, on specific issues in the public domain. Some NGOs within the network have been unable to downplay their identity and merge with the broader Stree Vedi entity, with the result that Stree Vedi has had no public presence on these occasions.

Funding issues have also been raised, with some members objecting to others in the network accepting foreign funds. What is very disturbing is that many NGOs organise seminars and other programmes on women's issues and believe this is feminist strategising. While there is certainly room for all kinds of forums, what is lost is the space for a feminist politics. Therefore, I wonder how we, as women, are going to face the onslaught of fundamentalism and the patriarchal state if we do not continue to develop our feminist politics!

At this point I must say that neither the women's movement nor the fishworkers' movement have been able to grapple successfully with the caste question. I have made great efforts to understand it and to be open to the experiences of those who have lived with social discrimination. I have lived and stood shoulder to shoulder with them, fully conscious of the fact that some of us have caste-based privileges and I have tried to share as far as possible. I am conscious that what I write here can easily be misconstrued, yet I dare to write because I confront it openly and honestly. Caste is a socio-political and economic reality and I feel it will continue to manifest itself and plague us till Indian society rids itself of the institutions that uphold caste; and each of us has a part to play in this.

Despite these woes, despite its numerous strains, the women's movement has, on the whole, stimulated me a great deal. The Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS) has succeeded in expanding the space for exchange, analysis and knowledge-sharing, and, through regional meetings, has helped link urban and rural academia, thereby fostering young scholars with new insights and vision. For me, primarily an activist, I continue to draw inspiration from these forums and from the powerful voices of the committed and graying generation. How else could there have been such an exchange between academics and activists, old and young?

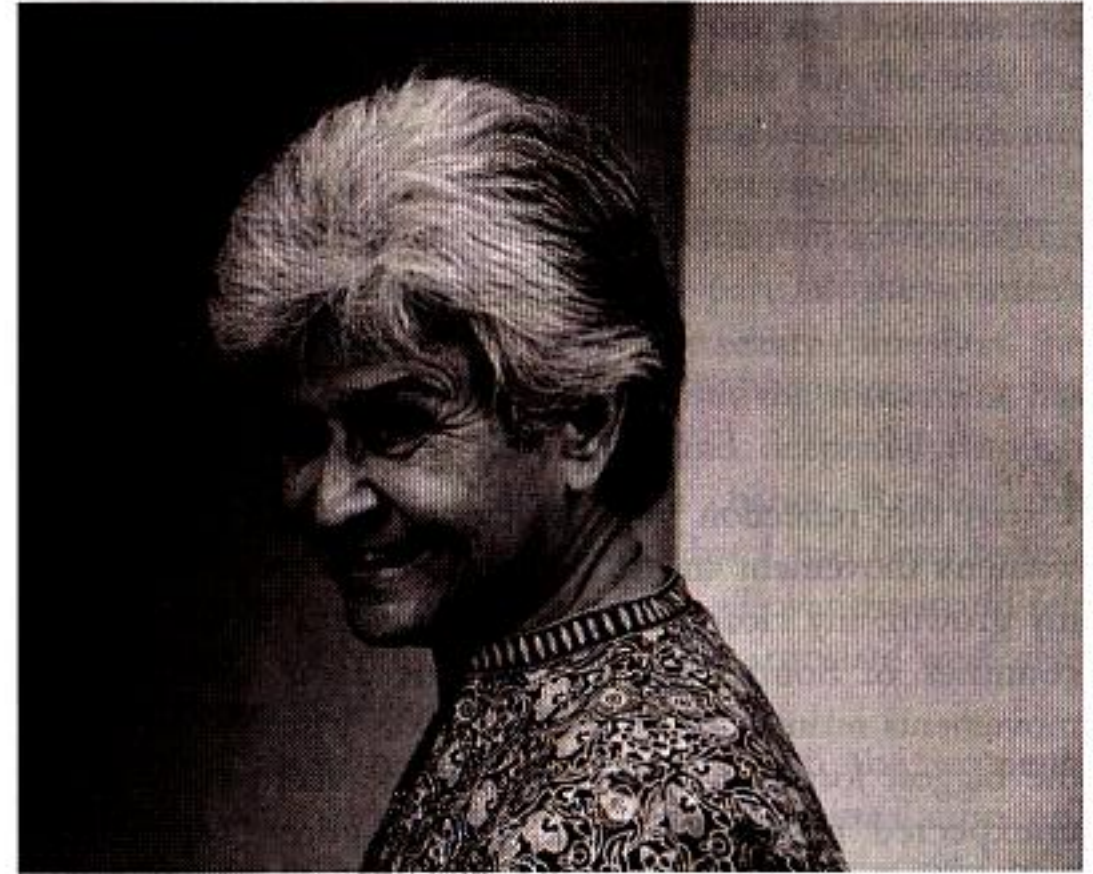
With the fundamentalist right assuming the violent role of moral police, the subject of religion and its politics has gradually gained ground in the women's movement. Unfortunately, the movement has felt more comfortable talking about religion as a fundamentalist force rather than as a social space where the majority of Indian women find meaning and identity. We must acknowledge our failure to engage sufficiently with religious practice, per se, as most of us feminists prefer a secular identity. I must acknowledge here that some Christian and Muslim women have stood their ground, challenging patriarchy within the institution of organised religion and reinterpreting theology from a feminist perspective. I am thinking especially of Gabriele Dietrich, who has been a great friend and inspiration in my work – it was she who first challenged the Indian women's movement on its avoidance of the religion question, way back in the early 1980s.

What I haven't mentioned so far that still keeps me rooted with women workers, is the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA). Aleyamma Vijayan and I helped create SEWA in Kerala in the mid-1980s when we were working with fishworkers and reed workers. Both sectors were heavily dependent on natural resources for their livelihood and were being marginalised. Women were desperately seeking work and the domestic sphere seemed the only option as they had no other skills. Our objective was to see that the women who became domestic workers retained their identity and remained visible in the workforce so that they could claim their rights as workers. The idea was to professionalise domestic services like caring for the sick and the aged, assisting in the post-natal care of women and looking after babies and children, while at the same time helping women to establish their contribution to the economy and claim their legitimate rights. Over the

years, women were trained to run canteens and clean offices, and their services multiplied.

As the basis of this process is to build women workers' solidarity, members meet every month in their local areas to discuss various issues and act on them, if necessary. There are regular seminars where the more active women participate and this helps them grow. Now that SEWA is recognised as a trade union in Kerala, it has members from the unorganised sector as well. In a highly politicised state like Kerala, where workers' unions are widespread, SEWA's focus is to gain visibility for women workers' issues on the labour front. When, at a public meeting, a stalwart of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions asked, "But what is SEWA's ideology?" I replied, "Feminist politics." He was completely taken aback but, for the benefit of the others, I explained what I meant and that seemed to reassure them that we knew what we were talking about! To build such a union in this state is a real challenge, as being both independent and solely a women's union, is a misnomer in the Kerala context.

I feel that my involvement in all these movements has kept me stimulated and rooted in reality. I am truly grateful to everyone I have met on this journey; I have grown in my understanding and I have seen several women blossom – particularly rural women and women workers. More generally speaking, an impact has certainly been made on societal processes and, while there is no turning back, the challenge is to keep marching ahead. The younger generation must have access to the debates, the contradictions and various positions in the women's movement so that they don't reinvent the wheel – they can stand on our shoulders and carry forward the struggle for equality and freedom. Creating a better world for our children has to be our collective dream.



Kamla Bhasin is a woman of many parts – activist, gender trainer, inspired networker, writer of songs and of books, tireless crusader for women's empowerment. Over thirty years of working with NGOs and women's groups in the development sector have made her a household name across South Asia, where she has energised many campaigns and forged strong links on several issues of common concern. She worked for over twenty years with the Freedom from Hunger Campaign of the Food and Agriculture Organisation, over the course of which she wrote extensively on participatory training, women, and sustainable development.

I am not a Wall that Divides, I am a Crack in that Wall

KAMLA BHASIN

I start this reflection with salutations and gratitude to the women's movement and all its members. I owe my creativity, my growth, my closest friends, the homes I have in all the countries of South Asia to this movement, and to other movements related to it. In January 2006, when I experienced the biggest loss possible in my life, the sudden and totally unexpected passing away of my daughter, Meeto, this movement gave me the strength to continue living and to find some meaning in life. At that point in my life, I had a husband who was suffering from severe manic depression, and a twenty-five year old son, almost totally disabled/challenged, dependent on others for every need. Meeto was able, capable, loving, the hope and future for my son and me. Meeto was my life partner, my main support. She and I were also connected in, and through, several movements. All of seventeen, Meeto was with me in Beijing, she worked with South Asians for Human Rights for over a year, she lived and worked in Sri Lanka for several months. She left us when she was twenty-seven. At that time she was doing her PhD at Oxford on the Ahmediyas, the Muslim sect being persecuted in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

I was devastated by Meeto's passing. The loss and the pain were unimaginable. Life seemed over. Had I not been part of

something larger like a movement, losing Meeto would have meant the end of life, the end of all meaning, all purpose. My South Asian feminist network reached out and held me in a big, comforting, healing embrace and gave me the will, the strength, the reason to continue living and learning from life; learning from the harshest lessons life was teaching me.

I did not step into or join the movement in any conscious way – much later, others said I was part of the women's movement. I said, so be it. For me the reality came first, the naming much later. My relationship with the movement has been an organic one, it developed and deepened through experiences, and quite a lot through chance. Reading and learning about feminism reaffirmed what I had been feeling and doing already. I think many women all over the world felt the same way, but only those who were articulate were able to write about their feelings.

When I think of my relationship with the women's movement and with feminism, many questions crop up, questions like **how** and **when** does one become part of a movement? **Who** is considered to be part of it? **Who decides** who is part of the movement and who isn't?

My unschooled mother fought so hard to have her own voice and space that my parents were constantly fighting. She was strong, articulate and a born leader. During elections she canvassed for candidates of her choice. She did not stop me from playing with boys, climbing trees, going fishing, travelling alone. Was she a feminist and part of the women's movement, if there was one in the 1950s?

My father did not crush his wife's identity, he was proud of my 'boyishness'. He encouraged me to be independent. He taught me to ride a bicycle and motorcycle, to drive a car. Was he a feminist without knowing the word?

Many Bangladeshi feminists have said Taslima Nasrin is not only *not* part of the women's movement in Bangladesh,

she has harmed the movement. Is this so? Does Talisma have to be part of a women's organisation to be part of the women's movement? Do women have to agree with everything she says for her to be accepted as part of it?

As for me, I suppose I am part of it otherwise I wouldn't be in this volume! However, please, someone tell me, when did I become part of it? Which action of mine heralded my grand entry into the movement?

To help you answer my question, here is my story... While my five siblings were born in small towns or villages in Rajasthan, I 'happened' to arrive on this earth in Shahidanwali, a small village in Punjab. My family had gone there for a wedding when I was born. This was in 1946. A year later Shahidanwali became Pakistan and our family became Indian. My place of birth and the land of our ancestors became not only a foreign, but an enemy, country. I have spent my entire adult life dreaming of, and working for, peace and cooperation between the two countries I belong to.

My father was a medical doctor. My mother, although the daughter of a medical doctor and sister of educated men, was unschooled. She learnt to read Hindi after her marriage. Her being unschooled, however, did nothing to reduce her self-confidence or dignity. She was assertive to the extent of being a ziddi (obstinate).

All six of us studied in private or government schools in villages or towns in Rajasthan. My first was a private school called Taange ke Addewaali Panditji ki Paathshala. It had one room and a veranda, five classes and one teacher, Panditji. Our father sent us there because Panditji paid attention to our handwriting and to memorising tables – I can still recite tables up to twenty-five, with a musical lilt.

As to books in the family, I can only remember a Hindi-English dictionary and some cheap novels and magazines in Hindi, in addition to our textbooks. This was mainly because

our father's salary was just about enough for the basics, and books were not part of the basics. Since I did not know what books were about, I did not miss them. I was an outdoors person. I am grateful I was not forced to be housebound like most other girls. Because I was literally the only girl outdoors, I played only with boys. I don't remember this being a problem for anyone, not even for the neighbours. Perhaps because we were not local, the neighbours did not bother about my 'strange' outdoor ways, and my parents did not have to be accountable for my behaviour. In most games I was better than most boys and I do not remember them minding my presence or being better than them. If any games or celebrations like Holi or Lohri required leadership, I was the undisputed leader and I do not recall any opposition or tension as a result.

I did have girlfriends but I didn't play with them. I don't think they played, they helped their mothers. I helped, too, but I did the outdoor chores like running to the bazaar, getting biscuits made at the baker's, etc. So, I was the tomboy of the family. My older and younger sisters also had no restrictions, but they were not tomboys.

My schools were mainly co-educational. The government college in Jaipur I went to was for girls only, but university was again mixed. During college and university I spent most of my free time on sports. Most of my women co-students did not have an interest in sports or in cycling around, like I did, many of them couldn't because they were not allowed to. It was I who visited my women friends in their homes, they seldom came to mine or to my hostel when I was at the university.

Since I still did not read much, I was not aware of any writings in Hindi or English on women and their status. Quite naturally, and quite unconsciously, I claimed and got my space and my voice. Because I was confident and quite fearless, my parents were not afraid to let me travel alone from one city to

another, even when I was as young as ten. All this definitely helped me in charting out my future paths.

I did my masters in economics from Rajasthan University, Jaipur. Quite by chance I got a fellowship to go to Germany for two years to study the sociology of development. After my studies I lectured in Germany, providing orientation to German experts going to developing countries as part of development aid. Although this was a permanent job, I left it after a year to return to India.

At twenty-four, I married a friend of my brother's who insisted I marry him. I had tried to dissuade him for five years but then I gave in saying, "I am telling you, it will not work." He was in the army, a very nice man, an accomplished officer and devoted to me, but that kind of life was not for me. I had this urge to do something myself, something with the poor with whom I had grown up in my childhood. It was an instinctive idealism I suppose, something in the air in those post-Independence years. I walked out of the marriage and joined Seva Mandir, an NGO in Udaipur, and worked there for four years on issues related to poverty, development, water and education.

I think my real education about poverty and the very deep-rooted structures of caste, class, feudalism and patriarchy came while working with Seva Mandir. As there was a severe drought in Udaipur at the time, I decided to focus on making water available to adivasi and dalit communities, neglected by government schemes. While working in Rajasthan I began to recognise the stranglehold of patriarchy on girls and women. Women were the most oppressed among the oppressed. From being instinctive, feminist ideas and urges became conscious articulations that emerged from the realities of life, rather than from reading or discussion groups. I started writing an occasional column in Hindi for the *Rajasthan Patrika*. What I saw in the field found expression in newspaper articles on

poverty and patriarchy. My then friend, later husband and now ex-husband, Baljit, and I wrote a column on our experiences and insights on rural Rajasthan for a Jayaprakash Narayan-inspired fortnightly called *Everyman's* (the socialists were oblivious of women!)

Around 1973/74 I was invited to become a member of the Rajasthan Social Welfare Board and soon after that, a member of the sub-committee on women and politics, part of the famous Status of Women in India Committee (this was before Vina Mazumdar took over as member secretary and turned it into a landmark study). Around the time of the first UN international women's conference in Mexico in 1975, I attended a national conference of state social welfare boards in Delhi, addressed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, where I met some more women working on women's issues. Slowly my individual feminism was getting connected to others. It was getting a name, becoming a conscious articulation. Was it now that I became part of the women's movement? Was I not feminist when I rode a motor cycle in rural Rajasthan in 1972, interacted with, and learnt from, rural women and put forward their views in my writings?

Before I joined or became part of the women's movement, I feel I was motivated to join social activism by the post-Partition idealism that was in the air when I was growing up. Through my work with Seva Mandir I had a deeper understanding of gender discrimination and slowly developed a feminist consciousness and feminist programmes of action. By the way, at that time we did not use the word gender – this concept came my way only in the early '80s. I understood it but used it, and still use it, quite sparingly. Many of us found it too neutral as a concept, neither politically sharp nor very useful for feminist struggles. We felt it was sanitised, did not call a spade a spade at a time when we needed to do so. Gender-based violence, for example, could mean violence by

women or men, on women or men; gender discrimination could mean discrimination against men. This was academically correct but politically blunt. We preferred patriarchy as a concept because it described the reality much better.

As far as being part of women's groups out on the streets demonstrating, doing street plays, writing and singing and raising slogans and songs goes, the most exciting time for me was the '80s. I moved to Delhi in 1979 to run the FAO/NGO Freedom From Hunger Campaign for South Asia. My work involved working with NGOs in South Asia on issues related to development, gender and human rights. In Delhi I got involved with groups like Saheli and Manushi, helped set up Jagori, and I was one of the six founding trustees of Kali for Women. My friend Bina (Agarwal) and I brought like-minded people together to set up the Committee on the Portrayal of Women in the Media, around 1983. We researched, campaigned, analysed, did advocacy and produced alternative media that countered the negative portrayal that most media presented.

So, was I born a feminist or did I become one? If I became one, how and when did that happen?

Let me attempt to give some answers, my answers. I think a lot of women are born feminist, we are natural feminists. We know intuitively (without reading feminist theory) that patriarchy is wrong, unjust and bad for us. For me the women's movement is like the ordinary dust or like air. It is everywhere, but you may not be aware of it. For me feminism has been and should be like water, fluid, taking the shape of the container it is in, and yet it is water wherever it is. Feminism is contextual, historical. It takes shape according to local circumstances and the needs of the time. We cannot judge the struggles of women and men in the past against present yardsticks; struggles of working class and middle class women, white and black women, upper caste and dalit women are very different, yet they all challenge patriarchy. There may be conflicts between

different strands of feminism but they are all part of the women's movement.

There are thousands of instinctive feminists in villages who are challenging patriarchy but are not present at national and international conferences. This fairly widespread tendency to consider mainly middle class, urban, educated women as part of the movement, as its leaders and spokespersons, has bothered me. Even for this volume the women who have been invited to contribute are the same. This tendency has made invisible the very important role played by working class women, rural and urban. My understanding is that for a very long time, and especially during the last two decades or so, the women's movement has been much more vibrant, militant and widespread in rural areas. The anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh led by working class women was huge; the Women's Development Programme in Rajasthan, and the Mahila Samakhya programme in many states brought thousands of rural women together to challenge the oppressive structures of patriarchy, caste and class. There are hundreds of other examples of local struggles all over the country.

In my experience, during the same period, feminist solidarity has weakened in the metropolitan centres because of the institutionalisation of women's groups. In Delhi, for instance, women's groups no longer celebrate March 8 jointly; they all do their own thing, which often lacks energy and militancy. I have not seen a large gathering of women's organisations in Delhi for a long time. On the other hand, I have witnessed several huge gatherings in rural areas of Rajasthan and U.P., and in cities like Kanpur, Lucknow and Bhubaneswar.

Singing our way forward

I think my main contribution to the women's movement, and the movement's contribution to my creativity, has been the

songs I have written for over twenty-five years. I don't know music, meaning I don't have any (conscious) knowledge of musical notes, but I do know folk songs – learnt in childhood – and am able to pick up new ones when I am with folks who still sing. I have been writing lyrics to fit the tunes of popular folk or film songs, and the themes can be anything that is of concern at that particular moment – violence against women, unfair laws, the burden of household work, etc. Or the songs can celebrate our solidarity or dreams for a just society. The ideas and inspiration for all of them have come from the movement, they are the product of the warmth of a workshop, the intensity of a discussion, the heat of a struggle. Actually, I do not 'write' these songs, they just emerge. I capture the sentiments and the words floating around and weave them into a song. I try and put complex analyses into simple words, emotion and passion are added to turn the cold data into a strong statement. While the song is being written it is shared with others and almost always altered – women change words, add or delete, to suit their own needs and environment.

These and other songs have been sung during meetings and workshops, demonstrations, women's day marches and other social gatherings. Women in SEWA (Lucknow) start their day by singing three or four inspiring songs which, they feel, makes them work much better. An inspector of schools in Bihar introduced one of my songs, *Irade kar buland/tu jeena shuru karti/to accha tha* (Liberate your desires/start living) as a daily prayer in about one thousand government girls' schools; instead of singing religious songs in the morning, thousands of girls are singing feminist songs! A programme for women's empowerment in U.P. has adopted another song, *Mil kar ham naachenge, gaayenge* (Together we'll sing and dance) for their non-formal education centres and they find even children love to sing it.

Some songs have been used on posters; short films and TV

spots have been made on five or six of them, many have been reproduced in several women's magazines, newsletters and books for neo-literates.

I have always felt the need for humour and joy in the women's movement. As our struggle is sure to be long and arduous, we need to enjoy the journey as well! Neither long faces nor taking ourselves too seriously is fun, so I have used humour, light-heartedness, even cheekiness, in many of my songs. One such song which I have had to sing every time Vinadi and I are together, is about women's studies and the tensions between academic and activist feminists. To infuse more humour in the movement I put together a whole lot of gender-related jokes in a book called *Laughing Matters*, published by Jagori on its twentieth anniversary.

Feminist rhymes for children

When my two children were born, I needed rhymes to entertain them but found most existing ones in Hindi and English quite senseless or sexist. I was forced to make up my own and, of course, they were not free of my feminism. I shared them with my friend, Razia Ismail, at UNICEF. She liked them and asked that amazing cartoonist, Mickey Patel, to illustrate them. And so was created *Dhammak Dham*, a book of children's rhymes, which challenged the gender division of labour within homes. It showed fathers singing lullabies to daughters, changing nappies, cooking; sons doing housework; mothers playing and going out to work, in addition to looking after the home. This book was translated into many languages in India and Pakistan, where they set it to music – EMI marketed the cassettes along with four hand puppets. The next piece of writing to emerge for and through my children was a long poem called *Ulti Sulti Meeto*, giving a daughter the right to be naughty, to be herself, to have a childhood. Kali for Women had it illustrated by a Malaysian artist, Simryn Gill, a young woman who had never

drawn before! Her illustrations were brilliant and this little book was loved by a whole generation of daughters. It, too, was translated into several languages in Pakistan. All this was in the 1980s. Almost twenty years later, in 2009, the U.P. government introduced both books into their Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programme, and ordered about 80,000 copies each. I wrote two more children's books, this time along with my children, so the personal kept flowing into the public and the political.

Cross-border feminism

From 1975 till the present, my main work has been at the South Asian level. The FAO Regional Project which I coordinated for twenty-six years (from 1976 to 2002) provided the rationale and resources to create, strengthen and nurture contacts between South Asian development workers, activists, academics, cultural activists and feminists. The UN umbrella made it possible for me to organise a series of regional gatherings, conferences, workshops, study tours and exchange of information through which South Asians could connect and work with each other.

Since 2002 I have continued this work through Sangat, a South Asian feminist network, because I was, and am, passionate about the necessity for peace and friendship between the neighbouring countries of South Asia. I am convinced that no country in the region can move forward alone or while at war with its neighbours. I am also convinced that development organisations, women's groups and NGOs can learn much more from the success and failure of similar work in each other's countries than from 'developed' ones. I was lucky to find people who shared these convictions in the FAO, and in the German and Dutch NGOs who financed this work; it is because of their support that it has continued for so long.

At FAO the idea was to build capacity among what we

then called 'change agents', and to facilitate learning and cooperation between organisations involved with rural development in the seven countries of South Asia. In pursuit of this holistic approach, we extended our mandate to work with feminists, human rights' groups, people's organisations and, gradually, also with cultural groups, using the power of their art for justice, equality, rights, harmony and peace. This work had a strong feminist perspective and it tried to link women's groups in different countries. For me, gender has always been part of other important issues like class, caste, religion, development; for most of us in South Asia it has never been a separate, stand-alone issue. So between 1976 and 2002 we organised a large number of South Asian events to bring together over a thousand committed and innovative women and men for collective reflection, learning and sharing around sustainable livelihoods and gender equality.

My UN passport made it easy for me to travel across borders without a visa. Slowly, but surely, I started feeling like a South Asian. It was most gratifying when, at the UN End of Decade Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, on my name tag which said 'India', Khushi Kabir from Bangladesh wrote 'Bangladesh', Nighat (Said Khan) from Pakistan wrote 'Pakistan', and I cannot remember who it was from Sri Lanka who wrote 'Sri Lanka'. I felt very good about this loving gesture of acceptance and ownership, and I still have that name tag.

The women's world conferences organised by the UN helped strengthen our regional and global networking and solidarity. These gatherings were very inspirational, they led to the creation of global feminist networks like DAWN, and South Asian feminists had an opportunity to meet and develop shared feminist perspectives on important issues. Some Pakistani women met women from Bangladesh and apologised to them for the wrongs done by the Pakistani army and

government on the people of East Pakistan in 1971.

Of course, these meetings were not without conflict, contentious debate and blame games. The worst moment for me was at the 1995 Beijing Conference, at the Peace Tent, of all places, where women from India and Pakistan had a real showdown. However, what was wonderful was that there were Indian and Pakistani women on both sides of the argument. Like all other movements, the women's movement has its share of ideological and personality-based divisions – sisterhood is not always global, or loving and compassionate. We, too, have passionate fights because, believe it or not, feminists are human!!

Connecting the dots

I have always tried to create linkages between development workers and creative artists like singers, theatre people, poets, dancers, film-makers and designers, because communication is the essence of development and change; especially in societies with strong oral cultures and low levels of literacy, songs, posters, films, photographs, theatre, etc., play a very important role. I often had to explain to people what dancers or designers had to do with the FAO, but over time I was able to persuade them that life cannot be divided into watertight compartments, that the rural 'poor' are also cultural beings, that development is not just a technical matter.

Once people started crossing borders, many other things also travelled; on each and every visit to a neighbouring country I carried books, posters, audio and video cassettes, back and forth. The diaries and books published by Kali for Women were always welcome; books, posters and reports brought out by ASR, Simorgh and Shirkat Gah in Pakistan; by Kantha Handa and the Women and Media Collective in Sri Lanka were in demand in other countries. ASR in Pakistan, S2 in Nepal, SSA in Sri Lanka, Proshika in Bangladesh translated,

published and distributed many of the booklets, reports, song books and children's books that I wrote, and posters developed together by South Asian feminists were printed and distributed in all our countries.

I was fascinated by an audio cassette of feminist poems, songs and skits produced by the Women's Action Forum (WAF) in Pakistan in the 1980s. My daughter, Meeto, who was six years old at that time, and I heard the WAF cassette so many times that we knew the skit on the Hudood Ordinance by heart. Written by Shoaib Hashmi and enacted by Salima Hashmi and others, it is one of the finest examples of the use of humour for educating and mobilising public opinion on social issues. We (Sangat and Jagori) were delighted to finally host this skit in Delhi in 2004, on the occasion of Jagori's twentieth anniversary and our feminist activism. Over 1500 people saw, laughed heartily, and were impressed by the feminists who created WAF in Pakistan and cast the first stone against General Zia's rule. The effectiveness of the WAF audio cassette inspired me to write more songs and to produce audio cassettes through Jagori. They were, of course, shared with friends in Pakistan so that creativity, inspiration and ideas kept flowing from one side to the other, kept trying to obliterate the divisions created by our governments.

These efforts to reconnect are about redefining relationships, about reconciliation; they are also about understanding conflicts in the hope of minimising them in the future. During these journeys between countries I realised the wisdom of ordinary people who could see who the real culprits are; they did not blame *all* Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs for their plight. I saw the desire of these people to forget the pain of the partitions of 1947 and 1971 and to connect, to dare to say that as we had been neighbours and friends in the past, we could be the same again. Partition does not have to mean animosity; brothers and sisters who divide homes and properties

can remain brothers and sisters. A shared past can become the basis for a shared future. From the pain of separation, we *can* move towards healing and rebuilding relationships with new rules, arrangements and understanding.

Religion and spirituality

Many of us have been trying to introduce culture, religion and spirituality into development thinking; I was one of the founders, in 1974, of the Asian Religious and Cultural Forum on Development which operated out of Bangkok for over twenty-five years. Sangat has organised several discussions on religion and spirituality, on the sacred and the secular. Just as feminists have challenged the patriarchal divide between mind and body, reason and emotion, nature and culture, we need to challenge the unfortunate and false divide between the sacred and the secular. Most feminists have refused to engage with religion and spirituality in a meaningful way; at least in our public statements, we have generally condemned religion as patriarchal, and shunned it. Over the last few years Sangat has initiated interactions between Buddhist nuns and feminist activists, and has invited feminists to conduct sessions on the sacred and the secular.

Working with men on masculinity

In the 1990s, I began to feel it was not enough to work only with girls and women on gender issues; we had to also work with men and boys on masculinity and patriarchy. Since I was doing workshops with men in some of the largest NGOs in South Asia, in international donor organisations, in the UN, and sometimes with men in government service, I was able to develop some understanding of men and masculinity. I realised that most men were not aware of how patriarchy harms them, dehumanising and brutalising them. The accepted notion of masculinity pressurises young men to be violent and

dominating, to drink, to have unsafe and irresponsible sex, to live a high-risk life. Masculinity and patriarchal norms require that men be providers and protectors, be valiant and militaristic, but I feel men need to struggle against patriarchy in order to protect themselves, too. My workshops with men have been very useful and have led to many changes, at least in some organisations.

Complex concepts in simple books

One very satisfying part of my feminist activities has been to write simple, readable books on feminism for activists. Having been an activist myself, I know how difficult it is for most of us to read academically written books on patriarchy, gender, etc. I was also aware that activists need to know the theoretical work done on these concepts, so I wrote simple Q & A books in order to explain the concept and practice of patriarchy, gender, masculinity, violence against girls and women, feminism, and so on. These books, published by Kali for Women, Women Unlimited and Jagori have found a huge readership, and have been translated into many languages by women's organisations and NGOs in South Asia, Turkey, Vietnam and Sudan. They are now available in Arabic, too, and are also being used by women's studies courses in some universities and colleges in India.

Feminist arithmetic: one + one = eleven

It was my daughter, Meeto, who told me some years ago that the one word that sums up my life's work is NETWORKING, creating webs of relationships across all kinds of borders. In a poster-making workshop led by Chandralekha, the wonderful choreographer, dancer, poster-maker and feminist activist, I created a very simple poster based on a Hindi saying, *Ek aur ek gyarah* – one plus one is eleven. I called it feminist arithmetic. This simple creation was published as a poster and postcard

in Hindi and English by Kali, and about twenty-five years later, when I asked Meeto to make a visiting card and letterhead for me, she used the same circle of 11 for the design, and it became the logo for Sangat as well. Another of our slogans is *I am not the wall that divides, I am a crack in that wall*.

Life for me has been an interconnected, interdependent web of relationships. Quite instinctively, I have been connecting people, organisations, movements, disciplines and countries, and so I have tried to connect rural development to human rights and women's rights; to theatre, music and postering; to academics and artists.

Exciting, but not easy to live with

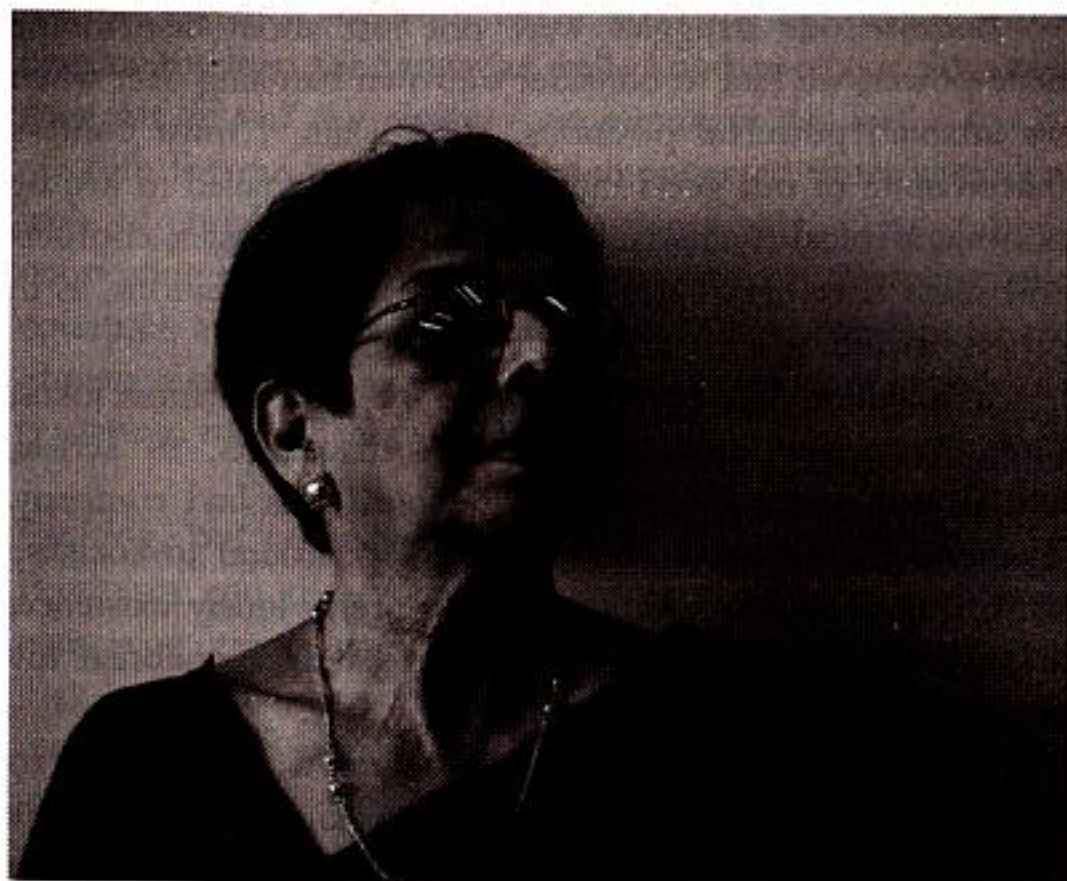
Feminism and the women's movement have been exciting, energising, creativity-enhancing and much more for me, but they have also extracted a huge price. It is by no means an easy ISM to live with. It has challenged me at every step and in every aspect of my life, because it is the only ISM that enters into our families, our bedrooms and our most intimate relationships; and it questions all equations, practices and traditions. It has turned the PERSONAL into the POLITICAL. The first target of my growing feminist consciousness was no one else but myself. I have had to examine all the patriarchal attitudes, biases and practices deep within me; constantly look at the way I dressed, made up or did not make up, at the way I deal with other girls and women, at how I behave with men and boys. My kind of socialist feminism was even more brutal as it forced me to question my caste and class, my duplicity in enjoying my class privileges while condemning the patriarchal privileges enjoyed by men. I have felt guilty, but have not made a serious effort to declass myself. I was in the UN as an international civil servant and became rich personally, while working on poverty. I see this as the biggest failure in my life. Although I have failed, I am convinced that

real change can take place only when our lifestyles change, when what we say and do become one.

Because our struggles were not just about dismantling male power, we had to consider our own handling of it when we attained powerful positions. Here again, I must confess that in spite of our good intentions, we have failed to live by non-hierarchical egalitarian principles. Power tussles, conflicts and splits have been rampant in women's organisations, as in others, including Left and socialist groups.

In a lighter vein, feminism made me unfit for most jokes, films, magazines, especially women's magazines, TV serials, and so on, so for most normal people I was bad company. Thankfully, there were enough feminists around to socialise with, otherwise I would have had a pretty lonely existence, and who knows, I might even have quietly abandoned my feminism.

In all my workshops, I warn the young women present to beware of feminism because it is a difficult and painful ideology to live by, and can only be practised in the company of brave men and women. I fully appreciate the fact that a very large number of educated, middle class women are afraid of coming close to it. But despite this, in the end I just want to say that I cannot imagine my life without feminism – other marriages have failed, but not this one.



Nirmala Banerjee was brought up in Bombay as a Maharashtrian but has spent most of her life living in Calcutta as a Bengali. She is an economist by training and is deeply interested in understanding the distinctive character of the Indian economy, constructed as it is on a foundation of caste, patriarchy and a pragmatic modernity. Her fields of interest cover a wide range, from public policy to the labour market and the working of the domestic economy; over the years, she has increasingly found herself looking at these issues from a gendered point of view. She strongly believes in the need for a feminist ideology for the successful working of Indian democracy. Earlier, she had worked as an administrator and urban planner, but she most enjoyed her long period of working as a research economist at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

A Pensive Feminist Looks Back

NIRMALA BANERJEE

FEMINISM rests somewhat uneasily in the psyche of most Indians. It is not that they are unaware of women's oppression; in fact, images of the oppressed bahu, the valiant mother or the helpless widow still dominate our audio-visual media as well as our literature. But the self-image that most Hindus cherish is as worshippers of mother goddesses and mothers, and as followers of powerful women leaders – Indira, Jayalalitha, Mayawati, Mamata. In reality, there is a sustained conflict between what is presented as 'sanskar' on Hindi television today and secular ideas of progress and liberalism. In this game of snakes and ladders, if women manage to climb up one ladder, they could as easily find themselves slithering down a snake and having to begin again. For someone like me, growing up in the 1940s and '50s in a middle class Bombay family, there was the fresh post-Independence enthusiasm about women's education and their newly acquired rights under the Constitution. But for educated daughters not to be married by the age of twenty years or so was still a matter of concern and shame for most families; and for the girls themselves, the ultimate ideal posed and accepted was of marriage in the mould of Sita-Savitri with their messages of the infallibility of husbands. Though the Hindu Code Bill had given daughters a chance to get a share of parental property, most of them would gladly surrender their rights to

it in exchange for a smile and hope of support from their brothers. Today, many urban families want their daughters to build careers; now it is the media and capital that are working hard to equate feminism with fashion and femininity, marriage and motherhood. Rural families have now embraced traditional upper caste norms in relation to marriage. 'Honour killings' are on the rise and parents seek to get their daughters married as early as possible to avoid any transgressions. In this mixed-up milieu, it is not easy for a woman to start thinking of herself as a person entitled to autonomy.

However, it is because the personal is indeed political that the feminist movement has taken root in this unfriendly soil. Each of us, sooner or later, does see that what is being dished out is not her just deserts and no amount of whitewashing with mythology, 'family values' or fate can make it palatable. The beginning of this feeling probably occurs at different points in life for each of us. For me, it started with being born the third daughter to a mother who, having already had two daughters, now definitely wanted a son. My parents were educated and modern, but for them a third daughter was somewhat of a digression in their well-laid plans for life. Not that I was neglected in any material way because of this; I was provided with all the necessary attention and opportunities that would ensure that I become a person well-equipped for a decent career and civilised living. But in growing up, I had to accept that a daughter could not make the same claims on her parents' affections as a son. One of my earliest memories is still very vivid: of sleeping at the edge of the bed next to the cold wall, while my brother (who, eventually, did appear a couple of years after me) slept by my mother's warm side. For a long time I used to wonder what it would have felt like to be born a son and sleep in that coveted place.

From the very personal to the general: in the 1960s, I joined the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation where

a slightly mad colleague decided that for me to become an urban planner, it was essential to be exposed to the seamier side of metro life. So, every week, we would borrow the office jeep and go up and down both banks of the Hooghly river, visiting industrial slums, run-down towns and refugee colonies. During these journeys we would see many men sitting around, always willing to drink tea with us and talk politics or local gossip; it didn't seem to bother them that we were usually there during working hours. But the many skinny, undersized women we saw there were always busy scurrying around doing something. If there were a few gathered near the tubewell, they would be more interested in keeping their place in the queue rather than talking to us. One obviously assumed that they, and not the gossiping men, were the workers in the family; but a statistician friend curtly corrected me: in urban West Bengal, only a minuscule percentage of women were in the workforce. So who were the women that I saw hurrying about? Why was it that their continuously busy schedule had no economic significance?

When, in 1973, Phulrenu Guha and Vina Mazumdar came to visit Calcutta on behalf of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, I mentioned this puzzle to them. At that time, they too were intrigued by the Census findings of women's declining role in the economy. To probe the issue further after the Committee's report was tabled in parliament, they got the Planning Commission to set up a group of concerned scholars to look into the nature and measurement of women's work. That is where I first met and made lifelong friends with people like Asoka Mitra, Maitreyi Krishnaraj, Shanti Chakravarti, Devaki Jain and, of course, Phulrenudi and Vinadi. In spite of all the work we have done on the issue, we have still not been able to persuade authorities to change their criteria for measuring work and workers. But then, we also know now that, in contemporary India, undervaluing

women's labour is perhaps patriarchy's most powerful weapon. Those in power are unlikely to give it up merely on account of our word power.

By the mid-Seventies, there were several of us in Calcutta who were interested in women's issues and committed to do some work in this field, but we had been a bit wary of expressing our interests and convictions in public because left-dominated West Bengal still considered the women's movement to be disruptive of class-based movements. Nevertheless, when in 1981, a small seminar organised by OXFAM on women in West Bengal brought us together on a common platform, we were each surprised by the knowledge as well as passion around the theme that found expression in those two days. Indeed, in some sense, what happened at that seminar changed the lives of all those who participated in it. Most of us were working women – academics, media persons, doctors, bankers, and so on; many had known each other before, but suddenly there was a new bond created between us that went far beyond our social or professional relationships. It was a bond based on shared passions and anger as well as the excitement of finding like-minded comrades. We went on to form our organisation, Sachetana, the first independent women's organisation in the region and, surprisingly, many leftist women – including a couple of card-carrying party members – were among its founder members. With Sachetana, we undertook all the kinds of experiments that women's groups have tried everywhere in the country – organised anti-dowry morchas, took up projects for counselling and legal advice, held classes for girls' education and skills-training, began several research projects related to women, and so on. None of us would claim that we were spectacularly successful in any of these missions; our independent character was often strained because some members were unhappy about criticising the Left government on its record on women's issues. Also,

over the next nearly thirty years, many members became dormant, others developed new preoccupations. But the organisation has survived and, for all of us, the initial anger and commitment and synergy generated still play a role in shaping both our professional careers and our personal lives.

If our movement and research have not yet changed the world, they have at least changed the way people talk about feminist ideas in public. In the early years, when I began to get interested in these issues, my colleagues, who were as liberal and left-minded as they come, were sharply disappointed; as one of them said, "Nirmala was doing some good work on important topics like the urban economy, but now she seems to be wasting her time on trivialities(!)." Another colleague, a very famous anthropologist, spent hours trying to convince me that the feminist movement was a western plot to break up the Indian family, an institution much admired the world over. Yet another scholar pooh-pooched the whole movement, saying it was just a bad imitation of a western fad. To some extent, our protests against these criticisms were not very effective because, in those early years, we were uncertain about what line to adopt to counter them. However strong our convictions, we were not ready then with arguments and research findings that could demonstrate that the biases we highlighted were neither incidental nor accidental, but systemic. Most of all, I think we ourselves were awed by the enormity of the charges we would have to levy on society and its power-brokers if we showed that, despite worshipping the mother goddess, Indian society was, and is, founded on deeply unequal gender relations. It has taken time, and also a surge in the number of those in the movement, for action and research to make a case that Indian public opinion can no longer dismiss as politically unimportant.

For me, two questions from critics were difficult to answer: the first, how we, city-born-and-bred middle class women,

could claim to share the same problems as poor village women who trudged for miles to fetch water and struggled all day to feed their children. Were we not guilty of blowing up our own trivial miseries out of proportion? The second question, along the same lines, what did Indian women have in common with their western counterparts? How could we expect western feminist theories, based as they were mostly on one-dimensional man/woman conflicts, to explain the position of an Indian woman who is at the heart of a complex social network with multiple actors?

It took me some time to work out that arguing the feminist case about women's subordination does not have to rest on measuring its actual experience; it is much more important to demonstrate the potential for subordination that is built into each social system through prevailing laws and conventions, practices and beliefs. By now some women like us have the tools to resist discrimination and subordination, but others are still struggling; this is why it is crucial for all of us to acknowledge that such potential exists in the system and that there is every possibility that we may suddenly slip back into that subordinate status unless we watch out. The threat posed by reactionary elements to women's emancipation cannot be underestimated.

I understood some of this at a late evening adda during a conference on the subordination of women organised by the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex, way back in 1978. Several of us from Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America met there for the first time, and one evening during that week, many of us were sitting together, chatting and getting to know each other over after-dinner coffee and a bottle of wine. The Egyptian novelist and psychiatrist, Dr. Nawal El Saadawi was amongst us; we didn't realise that she had gently started directing our conversation. Helped by the wine and the cosy atmosphere, there flowed various stories

of fights needed, initiated, lost and won, and while the discussions were not always coherent, they kept us talking late into the night. The next morning it struck me that Dr. Saadawi had got each of us to come out with her own half-formed ideas and thoughts about the theme of the conference. I think the success of the conference (many of us, till today, continue to refer to papers presented there that were published in the volume, *Of Marriages and Markets*) owed much to that initial understanding that we reached as a group.

Gatherings around feminist themes are always exciting but none could match the year-long thrill of being part of the DAWN process during 1984-85. The idea of building a sisterhood across seas and continents was like a heady drug and it worked because, while there were a few international prima donnas in the group who demanded more than their fair share of attention, on the whole most members went more than halfway to make friends with each other and, more important, to empathise with the problems faced by others. We had a year for the exercise, till the UN Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985; not a great deal of time for the huge task we had set ourselves, of working out a coherent alternative theorem of economic development and its gender implications. But we all cooperated, set aside our personal misgivings, if any, and succeeded, I think, in making the process work and get some striking results. What we did was to arrive at an entirely new theoretical position that demonstrated causal links between women's experiences in the process of development, and the nature of capitalist development itself in the post-colonial period. Esther Boserup had argued that women's plight was due to their having failed to secure their share of the benefits of an otherwise benign development process and, generally, this was the accepted position in the development dialogues of official agencies and donors. Our attempt at building an alternative model that

questioned the neutrality of the capitalist development process regarding women could succeed only if we grounded it in full knowledge of the nature of economic development and women's situation in diverse large and small, rich and poor countries of the global South. This could only be done by close interaction throughout that year, with members from different countries contributing their experiences and findings.

Nairobi was a huge success for DAWN and for the many activities it organised there; when DAWN's book (*Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*) was published in 1987, it was internationally hailed as a landmark in development studies – many academic centres, international bodies and donors considered it an essential read. In India, it was translated into several local languages for the use of grassroots organisations and students. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the DAWN process never did percolate down as intended to local organisations and movements, at least in India. Few people have evoked the DAWN line of analysis in their work of promoting women's empowerment.

It is a matter for reflection why, in India, where the process began, DAWN's ideas never caught on among budding feminists and local women's organisations. It may be, partly, that the macro-economic analysis that was its strength did not really apply to the Indian economy of the early Eighties; but its main failure lay perhaps in the vision it had of women – it noted that it was poor women who nurtured and sustained families, but it did nothing to question the gender division of labour that had made it so. There were some murmurings to the effect that men should come forward to share these responsibilities but, on the whole, in the vision described, women remained identified with the nurturer's role and DAWN's analysis did not question the essentialism or lack of choices that such identification implied. The argument then became circular: to ease their burden women needed to organise and

challenge the entire edifice of post-colonial economic imperialism. But how were they to find the time, the energy and the knowledge to do so unless that burden was eased?

It is undeniable that modern development forces have had many victims, both male and female. It is also true that both are able to survive only because they struggle together. Avoiding friction in order to continue working together is an essential part of the survival strategies of poor men and women. But at the grassroots, women's movements have to assert that women have a right to an alternative life, a life beyond the myths and compulsions imposed on them by patriarchy. We have to accept upfront that men – even poor, marginalised men – are party to women's subordination.

Around that time, perhaps as a reaction to DAWN's broad perspective, I had been feeling the urge to focus on something closer to home. Being born in Maharashtra, married to a Bengali and living in a joint family in Calcutta, I was familiar with the middle-class Hindu ethos in two parts of India, Maharashtra and Bengal. I noted with some surprise that, in spite of an apparently common family system, there was actually a marked difference between the two cultures in their treatment of women and also in the outlook of the women themselves. I hypothesised that this difference stemmed from a long history of widely divergent economic trends in the two regions. Therefore, when in the early Eighties, the Indian Council of Social Science Research offered me a grant to write on a somewhat vague topic – developments in women's status in India – I decided to explore these regional differences in a systematic way. At the time, Barbara Miller had just published her book, *The Endangered Sex*, analysing the pattern of regional sex ratios in India from 1901; she related the differences in the sex ratios of northern and southern states to variations in women's workforce participation rates, and concluded that while the rice-growing southern areas placed

greater value on women's labour (and, therefore, on women), the wheat-growing north did not and therefore neglected them, especially daughters. For my research project, I too decided to treat variations in sex ratios as my dependent variable and started looking for factors that could explain them. My reading was that, once one took account of not just the north/south variations but also the east/west ones, the pattern appeared much more complex and could not be explained by differences in cropping patterns alone – whereas these had changed radically in the twentieth century, sex ratios had not. This plunged me into what became one of the most fascinating academic exercises I have undertaken; it led me to explore historical, anthropological and demographic data and writings, as well as folk literature, along with a review of regional economic developments over that long period. I discovered an intricately interwoven network of strands from political history and economy, land-use patterns, technological changes, caste-based cultural traditions and demographic shifts. The project took a lot of my time and energy but it was an altogether rewarding exercise.

It was rewarding because it taught me an important lesson – that in working on gender-related issues, it is often not enough to remain within the confines of your own discipline; you need to be aware of developments in several related fields if you are to reach a satisfactory conclusion. As an economist, my interest is in analysing the relative positions of the two genders in the economy; but for that, an explanation that considers one-point data on economic variables alone can be dangerously misleading. Although no group is immune to economic imperatives, the direction and pace of their reactions differ widely, especially between genders, depending on the history and past practices of each. For example, after India accepted policies of trade liberalisation, it would have been logical to expect an upsurge in unskilled industrial

employment opportunities for Indian women since they are a cheap workforce, docile and hard-working, as required by many of the industries located in developing countries. But that has not happened, at least partly because the traditional profile of Indian women workers differs sharply from what is needed. The situation at any point of time may itself have been shaped by past economic factors, but in responding to fresh changes in those very factors, there may not only be big or small timelags, but also specific resistances to movement in certain directions. If one's own discipline does not provide clues to such permutations, it is essential to possess substantial peripheral knowledge in order to formulate meaningful hypotheses for further research. A good analysis, after all, has to have the capacity to locate those characteristics that are important for determining the final outcome, and these can as well be local as universal.

If local knowledge and connectedness are important for research in women's studies, we know that these are absolutely vital for promoting movements. All vibrant people's movements have to keep attracting large numbers of people who identify closely with the victims because they believe that such injustice could well occur in their own lives. They also need to attract at least a few people who are socially secure enough to articulate demands fearlessly. Women's campaigns that have had sustained support in India – like those against custodial rape and assault, dowry-related atrocities, domestic violence, alcoholism, or for reservations in elected bodies – matched the aspirations, fears and experiences of large sections of women. And among them were several who were articulate, socially visible and empowered by education and careers. All these factors ensured that the binds of patriarchal norms were loosened for significant sections of younger generation women. The state, too, has passed laws that, to some extent, protect women from

atrocities; that they have not worked very well is mainly because, from our end, we have not been sufficiently active in monitoring their enforcement at the ground level. This could be because younger leaders no longer find these issues to be their prime concern; or they may have lost faith in the methods of protest that women's movements had earlier used or, indeed, in the way they were organised. There are many young women working with NGOs on specific women-oriented programmes that have been initiated by donors or the government; it is natural that they view their work with these organisations as part of their careers and jobs, and also as their contribution to the feminist cause. For them, the welfare of their target group may be more important than a movement in the interests of women in general.

Even if women's movements are losing steam, there is plenty to engage one's interest in actual developments taking place in the situation of women. In the slums around my house, there are visible signs of women's empowerment: few families now have more than one or two children, girls are being educated and, from the small tutorial school that Sachetana runs for local girls, every year a batch finishes higher secondary education and goes on to acquire further qualifications. Though dowry is still a fixture, child marriages are not, and parents encourage daughters to find jobs if they can.

On the other hand, in the few West Bengal villages that we have studied, instances of child marriage, abduction and the selling of even ten- or twelve-year-old girls in marriage to grooms of unknown background, or sending them with dubious agents to work in distant places, are all too common. In most such cases, parents, the local panchayat and even police personnel seem indifferent to what can or has happened to the girls. What can account for this sharp difference (within a distance of fifty kilometres or so) between city and village in

the awareness of women's rights? What should our policy recommendations be?

Ultimately, it is the elected women in panchayats who will have to deal with these issues on behalf of rural women; but for that, they will need not only to be aware of the problems, but also to work towards policy measures that are effective. I am certain that this will take place in due course. From the time that local government bodies were formed in 1993-94 as mandated by the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution, I have met women representatives from many villages on several occasions; given that most of them are fighting their own battles with deprivation and family pressures, it is heartening to see how each batch of these elected women has grown in stature and confidence over these fifteen-odd years. But they work under a party system that discourages any deviations on their part from the party line; it won't be surprising if it takes them several more years before they can influence the party line into initiating some effective measures in this direction.

How, then, do I see the future of feminism in our society? I recall that I was about forty years old when we first launched the current phase of the women's movement in India. At the time, many of us were wildly optimistic about our ability to shortly usher in radical changes in the position of Indian women. After all, we had identified the disease and it was merely a matter of finding and applying the right remedy for it. Since the Indian Constitution was on our side, we felt it was simply a question of getting the government to take the right steps to fulfil its mandate. So we flexed our muscles and vocal chords, agitated for several new pro-women laws, negotiated with statisticians about correct definitions for work *and* workers, and generally felt confident about our course of action.

Now that I am nearly seventy-five, I am somewhat wiser.

In this belatedly acquired wisdom, I have understood the role that the pattern of female subordination plays in our society and its institutions. It is not just a part of the overall system; it is the cornerstone on which our most important social institution, the family, is constructed. The family rests squarely on the imperatives, for women, of marriage, monogamy and unstinting surrender of labour in the family's interest. There is no reason to believe that the importance of the family is waning over time; on the contrary, in the face of increasing economic uncertainty, most people have come to look upon the family as the one source of social security available to them, and are therefore shoring up its power structure. The Indian state appreciates the role of the family and is reluctant to enforce its own laws that can disturb the existing intra-family balance of power. For women, then, changes have to come through their own efforts; no other agency is likely to come forward and take up their cause.

My sombre mood is a result of this realisation. I myself never had it in me to initiate popular movements and at this age, I am probably incapable even of joining the rank and file. What I have enjoyed about being a feminist is the altered perspective it has given me on our society and our knowledge about it. Perhaps it is selfish, but I hope to continue exploring that standpoint and, in the process, hope that I will be able to persuade some younger people and policy makers to deal with the action part of it.



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She is the author of many books and essays on women, including *Indian Women*, commissioned by the Government of India for the UN's first world conference on women (Mexico, 1975) and *Women, Development and the UN: A 60-Year Quest for Equality and Justice* to coincide with the UN's fiftieth anniversary (2005).

"Once were Warriors"?

DEVAKI JAIN

ONCE were Warriors? is a gripping film, recounting the story of Maoris in New Zealand who moved to the cities, lived on the margins and were embedded and associated with low life on the lower side. They were once "warriors". There is no matching story here, I chose the title to say that we, who drew on and stretched further the threads of women's studies, were "once warriors" – at the forefront of debates on equality; on neglected sectors like unorganised labour and rural areas; on administrative and legal restructuring. We were 'free' – free of organisational tethers, free to move around in the space of justice movements. It could be Marianad one day – the fishing village which taught us about community-led resistance to every dominating force, be it the paradigm of development, the terrorism of livelihood-displacing technology or of caste and religious oppressions – or the Mathura rape case on another day. We were there, in some informal-formal way.

I do not want to go on to say "once were...but not now", as whatever we are now is also contingent, a natural concomitant of the passage of time. I would leave it at that but call attention to the importance of seeing the 'birthing' and growing not only of women-focused centres, but of all arms of the women's movement, including large membership organisations like the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), the All

India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) and, later, the Indian Association for Women's Studies, in the perspective of the mood of the times.

The decades of the 1960s, '70s and '80s were heady times, in my view. The political climate in India, despite all the pitfalls, was a continuum of the post-freedom ethos, underlined by a spirit of self-reliance and renaissance. Whether at Delhi University or in the New Delhi arena there were extraordinary people, and they were also connecting with each other. A sea change from the environment now.

To begin at the beginning

In some sense I was always a part of the women's movement, even from my childhood, if one could argue that experiencing gendered difference (which later became the basis for struggle) can be considered being part of the 'movement'. There was a clear demarcation of roles and attitudes between boys and girls, men and women, in the large and very heterogenous joint family into which I was born. Girls learnt dancing and vocal music and did not go out, while boys played outdoor games and were 'free'. In addition, women in groups or sanghas, either affirming their difference or using their conventional space, whichever, were always present in my life. My mother, even as I began to 'know' her, was a member of various mahila samajams, including very colonial ladies' clubs. Whether it was in the princely city of Mysore, where I was born, or in Gwalior, where my father was the Dewan, she was always an active and much admired part of those societies, alive to the values of women's collectivities. It was the kind of concern and feeling of bonding with women that spread to all of us, her three daughters, and which she expressed in such effective ways throughout her life.

I met with the women stalwarts, leaders, spokespersons of that time in these clubs, where we would go on our way

home from school to pick up my mother. Also in Madras or Mysore, or to the palace in Gwalior where the Maharani, later Rajmata, was an active socialiser with women and arranged several interesting activities, including dance-dramas, for the women around her.

Many decades later, as the wife of a Delhi-based activist, I had wonderful friendships with women like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Aruna Asaf Ali, Renuka Chakravarty, Durgabai Deshmukh, Sucheta Kripalani and many others of that era, the '50s and '60s, when each one of them was creating institutions and programmes, but at the same time were firmly bonded. Were they feminist? I would suggest that they were, though, due to a strong affirmation of India-defined (or post-colonial, anti-West defined) terminology and practices, they may not have liked this naming. They drew their programmes from the ground. They understood and worked for women's power, but that was not their only agenda. What was most engaging about them was their political sense; they were working with the India that we inherited with freedom, rebuilding programmes that would strengthen the economic status of less privileged men and women. They were the first women warriors.

Was I influenced by this exposure? Difficult to say, but I certainly was in the orbit of the then "women's movement," often derided as elitist. If one could have known where people like my mother came from – never schooled, married at nine, daughter of a very-poorly-paid, highly-burdened-by-endless-family-obligations temple official – and how such women stepped up and out to give themselves space and affirm it in the patriarchal powerdom, such views would have to be modified. We, her children, were so proud when she was elected to chair the reception committee for an all-India women's conference in Bangalore.

Was this exposure enabling? Difficult to say. In practice

boys were boys, as they say, cycling and free. My strongest desire was to become a boy; reading about the sex change operation was big news, and how to get to Holland and have it done became my goal. The dark shadows of tradition were closing in as I finished high school, and almost blacked out my not-yet-clear but very deep desire to "do something". Strong pressures to go through an arranged marriage; joint family danger in the form of sexual assaults by an uncle and further molesting by male cousins; irritation at being asked not to enter the gods' room during menstruation, all building up to the goal of *getting out*.

So, perhaps the experience of both – severe discrimination as well as my mother's love of mahila samajams – led me, much later, to unknowingly become a feminist. A person who simultaneously understands discrimination as well as the value of women bonding for women's affirmation.

Yet I cannot say with confidence that this past laid any informed foundation towards my becoming a feminist – I felt no solidarity or closeness to the girls in the girls' schools I attended, nor were the experiences of the women's college in Bangalore from which I graduated, or the Oxford labour college, or the Oxford women's college from where I got my diplomas and degrees, nor even teaching at Miranda House on my return from Oxford, in any way consciousness-creating.

On the contrary, I would say I suffered from what used to be called the "queen bee syndrome". I had become a self-confident, 'free' young woman who found the company of male colleagues at Delhi University far more interesting than the women who (I used to mock) sat in the faculty room and talked of children's illnesses and how they had been awake all night, while the men talked of Game Theory and Pareto Optimality.

This attitude changed and changed quite radically, thanks to Romila Thapar who was one of my closest friends while I

was at Miranda House from 1963 to 1968. Romila, who was in DU's history department, and I did many things together – walks, drives, DUDS (Delhi University Discussion Society) even wrote for a paper published by this society, so when, in 1963, Raj Thapar was putting together an issue of *Seminar* on women, Romila had me invited to write for it.

Obviously there was a strumming somewhere, to fight against what I had undergone myself as a girl. In my article I challenged the blessing I used to receive before the traditional oil bath that all of us girls had every weekend. I replaced the names of all those devoted wives with names of women who challenged men and social norms. Ahalya, Sita, Draupadi, Tara, Mandodari, the pancha kanyas, would bless girls so that they always served their men; they were replaced by Ambapalli, Gargi, Avaiyyar, women who resisted the norms and male domination.

Several years later, in the mid-'70s, I was approached by Sheila Dhar, at that time an editor in the Publications Division of the Government of India, who suggested that I work on a book on Indian women in time for International Women's Year, 1975.

Working on this book initiated my journey into feminism. I asked a demographer friend, Ashish Bose, to prepare a statistical profile of India's women with comparative data on men and women, as well as trends. He confessed that he had never sex segregated data before, but as he constructed the tables he was shocked to find, as I was, that the sex ratio in India had actually declined between 1910 and 1960, which is when his data set ended. This, in spite of great leaps made in the reduction of general mortality.

Many questions and hypotheses were churning in my mind on daughters and sons, on stereotypes about women, on achievement, and on oppression. I requested several of my friends to write for me, scholars like André Beteille, Romila

Thapar, Veena Das, Asok Rudra, and exponents of culture and politics like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Kapila Vatsyayan, journalists like Gita Aravamudan, even the young Renana Jhabvala, who was a student at Delhi University at the time. I had essays on child-rearing practices, on nurses and nuns, on the paradox of goddess worship and assaults on women, hoping I could get to the root of gender differences. These essays were often the first that the authors had ever written on the women's question.

I was troubled by the words 'status' and 'liberation', and tried to clarify them. I was also overwhelmed by the data. Women were bearing the greater share of the burden of poverty whether measured in terms of scarce resources, food, clothing, shelter, medical care or education. My Introduction to that 1975 volume was the beginning of my exploring the dynamics of gender. Struck as I was by the injustice, I nevertheless sensed that women need not become men to set things right. I critiqued the racing-off-to-catch-up approach which was the UN framework at the time. Women needed to fight for their place in this scenario, as women. If that could be called feminist, then I was becoming one.

In 1975 when the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) wanted to commission a study of an organisation of self-employed women in Ahmedabad, I was asked to do it. Since I had no institutional affiliation I was given a housewife's fellowship of Rs 500 per month by ICSSR and my report on SEWA was published by them. However, I needed an institutional base to continue this work and was directed to a registered society that had been doing good work on employment policy, but had become dormant after its key personnel moved on. This was the Institute of Social Studies; using that as a base I began my journey in women's studies. Women as workers and their invisibility in statistics, as well as the neglect of their amazing creativity interested me greatly,

and so my first project was to question the data on women's participation in the labour force as compiled by the National Statistical Survey Organisation (NSSO).

We saw women in the fields and on the roads of India doing hard physical labour, always working, yet official statistics told us that less than half as many women as men were at work. The ISS time-allocation study was an ICSSR funded research project and took us to six villages, three in West Bengal and three in Rajasthan, recording what every person did in half-hour slots. Some of us lived in the villages for a year and recorded what poor people – women and men and children – *actually did*.

The information we gathered was shocking. Women and girls were working *eighteen hours out of twenty-four*. Boys played or went to school while girls cooked, cleaned and fetched. Among the poor, they were often breadwinners for whole households. Women's work often increased as a result of a 'development' intervention without a corresponding increase in either income or convenience. Among the asset-less there were more women workers than men, who preferred to remain idle rather than work for poor wages. Women took any work they could find, as long as they could bring food into the house. We had many other insights, such as why the work participation rate (WPR) of women in West Bengal was so low – they were engaged in what is called feminine, permitted work, such as begging or even sexual services, but not allowed to do waged work in the fields like their Rajasthani sisters, a sort of female seclusion. They put in several hours of work cooking for the labour or cleaning grains within the four walls of their homes, but that was not reported.

To see whether there was a way out of this terrible reality in which poor women and girls lived I set out, with Nalini Singh and Malini Sheth, to present case studies of 'successful' attempts by poor women to escape this poverty. This

encounter, documented in *Women's Quest for Power*, was both thrilling and devastating. (Ritu Menon edited the book for Vikas and that is how our friendship began.) Against tremendous odds of poverty, disregard and overwork, women were asserting collective strength and transforming their lives; what's more, they were offering ideas on how to organise and move out of unbearable and unjust situations. But their brilliance was not part of mainstream knowledge.

At the Institute for Social Studies Trust then, we began to concentrate on women in poverty, not only for information but for action. During the decade 1975-85, we were on overdrive at ISST: unearthing new types of data, new ways of understanding women, but almost always working on what can be called class – but used to be called women in the poverty spaces – moving this knowledge into the public domain both through participation in policy-making spaces in government and other agencies, as well as through publishing. Our documentation centre became a hot spot for what was called grey literature, because it was typed or cyclostyled – there were no computers then. We were everywhere – whether during the registration of the Indian Association for Women's Studies, or on the national committee to prepare for UN meetings, or on advisory committees in ministries or in the quest by international agencies for gender specialists ... moon-walk over the top.

But it was never a peaceful or enabling space either for these centres or for us as individuals. In other words, if one did a then-and-now, I would say that the narrowness of the space at that time, the smaller number of agencies, the striking difference in material capacity (that is, funding) as well as what can be called proximity or a hothouse atmosphere, was unpleasant if not painful. It is often said that there was greater solidarity, a sharper focus on issues and fighting for them then, more than now... Yes and no. For the same characteristics also

led to exclusion, downsizing, stigmatising – and envy. ISST being totally unofficial – no government or large donor funding, staff just informally drawn from people who came up to work, no space, yet very visible and respected – was an oddity, a poor cousin who could not be ignored. Today, with a proliferation of such centres, both big and small but with more clarity on donor funding, the space is less suffocating – but also less political. A little more space, perhaps, but a lot duller because of maintaining neutrality.

The question of whether we were a feminist organisation, a women's collective or a bureaucratic organisation haunted us at ISST. We may not have had a philosophical perspective as a group but each of us had an underpinning affiliation – Gandhian, socialist, or other – and brought it to bear on our outlook.

Around this time, the late 1970s, I declared I was a feminist but did not expect my colleagues to do the same. I would say this self-naming sprang from many sources. For one, a friendship, really a sense of sisterhood, with Gloria Steinem who became a friend while she was at Delhi University in 1958 and I was working as a research associate at the Indian Cooperative Union. At the time Gloria and I, the same age, single and free, were just happy friends with no connection to the women's movement. It was the late 1950s after all. But without our knowing it we had both arrived at a women's platform by 1975 and were thrilled at making this unexpected political connection.

Feminism, or feminists then, believed in non-hierarchical set-ups, in the importance of process, in consciousness-raising, to develop a collective voice. In the US various organisations were actively articulating a political voice for the women's movement, and of course *Ms.* magazine, which Gloria founded, changed the language and opened up wonderful spaces for women to talk. I drank in all this, attended *Ms.* collectives,

editorial meetings, wrote with them, and found I could identify myself with that excitement, that language and identity. The feminist label was liberating, as it did not bind you to any one political ideology, yet gave you an identity. So many other terms have been offered over the years, womanist, for example, because 'feminist' was rejected as a northern tag, not suitable for our struggles in the South ... But for me it just fitted with what I am.

I tried to interpret feminism, learning all the time from the women's gatherings that we all participated in those days, moving from workers engaged in bidi-rolling or prawn-peeling or chindi-making, to members of milk and pappad cooperatives, IAWS gatherings, international meetings and brainstormings. I wrote and wrote on feminism, on its various avatars and on the need to let all of them surface, as they made for combined strength. I suggested that feminism has always evolved – been described, bound, unleashed and enacted in many ways. Elastic, flexible, mutated, searched for, found, doubted. It is said sometimes that there are as many feminisms as there are cultures. The concept of 'many feminisms' is not plastic: it suggests separate pieces, not a soft, malleable whole. In the desire to be inclusive, accommodating, reverential to difference and diversity; in the concern for rejecting the rigid, authoritarian shades of patriarchy and of male regimens, defining feminism tends to become a chimera. Sometimes it is a quest not a platform, a vision not a practice. Yet the identity it provided imbued in many of us the political fervour which still persists, as the term is increasingly being adopted by women everywhere, whether in scholarly abodes or in the field.

The UN's first world conference on women in Mexico in 1975, however skewed by the overarching leadership of the traditional international women's organisations of the time, established the presence of, and an identity for, a worldwide

women's movement. It set in motion institutional and knowledge-based initiatives all over the world. I would say that the Mexico conference was a defining moment in my life, and many of us who were there feel something, even now a sense of being the first – warriors maybe, or maybe just foot-soldiers dedicated to something called the women's movement. I will never forget the awesomeness of being in one big hall in Mexico with 10,000 women, one big voice of cheering and singing. It forged something in me, and I recall sharing this thought with Gita Sen as we walked into another hall ten years later in Nairobi, that if anything could establish that there was a women's movement it was that opening plenary at the conference in Mexico City.

At the second conference in Copenhagen in 1980, women began to see "differences", specifically and for me, in the North-South divide. For example, at the official Forum, the Secretary General of the Conference, Dr. Lucille Mair, an experienced academic and stateswoman, spoke of the New International Economic Order (NIEO), of initiatives to settle the Palestine issue peacefully, and so on. But our Scandinavian women hosts saw this as 'politicising' the women's movement, splintering the solidarity with "conventional, traditional, international divides". In the non-official spaces, an understanding of difference was expressed in another way. Women from the South were uncomfortable with the patronage of their northern sisters, expressed in the latter's research analyses and conclusions regarding them. We appeared to be poor and illiterate, trapped in convention and archaic cultures, needing to be drawn into more modern systems. South women objected to the incompleteness and inappropriateness of this analysis and its implied claim of cultural and political superiority. There was also a certain inequality in the descriptions, since northern women seemed to be economically marginalised and socially trivialised *in their own milieu*.

I got a chance to examine all this closely thanks to an invitation from the OECD/DAC/WID in Paris to give a lecture to the group's pre-Nairobi planning meeting. I read and analysed almost 145 project reports on North-South transfers of funds for what was called "women in development" projects; they showed that almost all had a negative impact on poor women – they lost out because their roles had not been identified.

I circulated my lecture, which I called "Development as if Women Mattered: Can Women Build a New Paradigm?" to a selection of women whom I had met on my travels, one from each continent of the South. Claire Slatter, a journalist in Fiji, (when I was Vice Chair of the Asia-Pacific Centre for Women and Development, APCWD), very sharp and knowledgeable about politics in Fiji; Marie-Angélique Savane, the founder of African Association for Women in Development (AAWORD), the first continental network of women engaged with development in Africa, whom I met along with Neuma Aguiar in Rio de Janeiro at a seminal conference on women in the labour force in Latin America; Fatima Mernissi, whom I had met at Harvard at a feminist dialogue across religions; Peggy Antrobus whom I met in Copenhagen. All of them felt this reality was their experience, too, so when I invited them to a seminar in Bangalore in 1984 to thrash out our alternative, they came willingly. Since it was an international meeting I could not invite most of my Indian women friends – but Ritu Menon and Urvashi Butalia joined us in Bangalore as they were special at that time, having just founded Kali for Women, Asia's first feminist press. Their first publication, *Speaking of Faith: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Development* was jointly edited by Diana L. Eck and myself, and I was on their Board of Trustees.

And there in Bangalore, in my parents' home, was born the third world women's network, DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), which designed a

framework for locating women in the development arena such that it linked poor women's situation, both negative and positive, to the macro-economic and political framework of their region: the food crisis in sub-Saharan Africa, the cultural crisis in North Africa and the Middle East, the debt crisis in Latin America, and poverty and militarism in the Asia-Pacific. The network suggested that it is only if the struggles and contributions of poor women in these regions were seen against this background, could there be an understanding not only of the 'what', but an indication of the 'how'. The levers that could bring about a transformation would be revealed by such a contextual as well as macro analysis. This intervention by DAWN into the discourse on women and development not only transformed its intellectual underpinnings, it also shifted the creativity, the intellectual leadership from 'patrons' in the North to 'clients' in the South.

The first edition of the DAWN text (printed by NORAD) and a summary written by Hameeda Hossain (printed by Finnida, as gestures of goodwill and support) were presented at the UN End of Decade Conference in Nairobi, 1985.

I was thrilled when Indian women's groups from Maharashtra translated my paper into Marathi; others joined us in discussing the DAWN document, its uses and improvement. Later the Government of India had the summary translated into several Indian languages to enable grassroots groups to frame their analyses.

Nineteen eighty-five also saw the Non-Aligned Movement's World Conference on Women, held in New Delhi prior to the Nairobi one, at which Vina Mazumdar and I were official delegates! It was a most extraordinary conference, asserting our politics and a post-colonial identity and perspective. The DAWN framework was presented there, too, and brought about some unity among third world representatives for negotiating in Nairobi.

I experienced many highs during these two decades – setting in motion other organisations and networks, creating programmes, engaging with the government in improving the visibility of women as workers across the board, in data collection, in schemes and policies. Publishing books with colleagues at ISST, more than a thousand articles in newspapers and journals; knowledge-driven "voice", as it is called now, emerging from field work.

In 1993, when I turned 60, I insisted on retiring as director of ISST. I had noticed that those who found or lead civil society organisations, including women-focused ones, remain like icons as there is no age bar among them. I wanted to start the trend of moving out, of making the institution bigger than the person. So ended the seventeen years during which I built and governed ISST, the most wonderful years of my life. However, like all over-extended entities, whether human or otherwise, ISST and I suffered the consequences of this overdrive. I made many mistakes dealing with over-subscribed work and under-subscribed finances, with the unhappiness of close colleagues who had been key to the energy of ISST, and curse myself for that blindness in retrospect. If there is one wish I were given today, it would be to relive those years with greater wisdom.

I also experienced many lows. I had idealised feminism as being inclusive and affirmative but found that feminist *practice* was not as widespread as being feminist. Our institutions could not escape certain typical male syndromes, such as the pathology of succession. I wrote about Hermits and Caves, how even in movements so removed from formal structures, organisational culture was not accommodating and inclusive – stalwarts were often driven to becoming hermits in their caves.

Interestingly, and happily for many of us, the term feminist is used far more widely now than it was a decade ago. I meet

bureaucrats, journalists and activists who call themselves feminist, despite the generally aired view that the younger generation everywhere does not identify itself with the struggle for selfhood. I used to joke with current mass movement leaders like Medha Patkar and Aruna Roy about why they didn't also acknowledge the women's movement and identify themselves as feminist. Women are at the forefront of their struggles, too, the most outspoken as well as the most public face. But I understand their hesitation, for as soon as we declare that we are feminists, associated with the women's movement, we are not only stereotyped but stigmatised. It is at once a badge for exclusion and stereotyped inclusion. The same pigeon-holing dogs those who claim dalit or minority spaces – we are that and nothing else.

There is a reappearance today of what was part of advocacy in earlier eras, the belief that women have special skills which are worthwhile in managing the economy or the corporate sphere – their skills in networking and in negotiating are being highlighted. But the recognition that these same skills are present in women at the lower end of the social and economic ladder and need to be enhanced and celebrated, is missing.

In my view, very many women's groups today, even feminist ones, are trapped in globally determined priorities and concepts leading to a moving away from earlier agendas. Violence against women is universal – it operates across race, caste, class and location – so it is high on the international agenda. Unpaid household work, especially care-work, is another such universal. These issues are dear to funders for they resonate everywhere and have caught the imagination of women's groups. But for many of us this is a great loss, as unfortunately, the focus on women as economic agents, producers who are invisible and unrecognised despite their contribution, has shifted. We built the unorganised workers' movement; and women like Ela Bhatt were instrumental in recognising – and

persuading the International Labour Organisation to recognise – women in the informal sector as contributing significantly to the economy. I remember persuading the then Labour Minister to call for a conference on unorganised labour, which he did.

Bringing visibility through statistics and case studies on the punishing lives, as well as the capabilities, of women workers was our agenda; ISST was the first to examine the registration of workers on Maharashtra Employment Guarantee sites – the precursor of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) – and show that women were often the majority of workers on such sites. This identification must continue, the *aam aadmi* needs to be replaced in political flag-waving with the *aam aurat* ...

For she is everywhere. She is 40 per cent of India's agricultural labour, 33 per cent of her cultivators, 86 per cent of her informal workers (non-agricultural) and 25.6 per cent of workers in the garment export manufacturing sector. These statistics do not reflect the full reality, as women's contribution to production often escapes counting, as do her multiple tasks and self-perceptions. She crowds the spaces of the poor, the deprived and those who lose livelihoods first, in any crisis. Her daughters are mother surrogates or sold for survival – figures on maternal mortality blow the mind.

She crowds the demonstrations for justice. She easily enters into collective presence, be it protests by waste-pickers or political rallies. She is the face used by the publicity for programmes like NREGA or Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. Or on the flip side, to show starvation, to illustrate the grief of bereavement, to parade the outcome of calamities like war or terror attacks – she is the widow at home.

Yet, as the first person in the value chain of production and the principal sustainer of households, especially of the poor, she holds up much of the sky of economic success. In

sericulture areas she rears the cocoons; in bidi-rolling areas she rolls the bidis; in the hills she is the principal farmer as her men migrate to cities to work; in coastal areas she vends the fish that is not auctioned; in slums she is the domestic worker, both in her own house and in others'. Her role as the provider of the basic necessities for her household engages her in water wars with her sisters, in city slums or around village wells.

Two occupations for which women need no training at all are domestic work and sex work – and both are increasingly crowded by women. Sixty per cent of all the women in the 'service' sector are domestic workers and not, as we imagine, in call centres; and the statistics on the rise of trafficking, especially of young girls, are now well-known.

It is surprising, then, that the *aam aurat* is not the focus of political goals, unlike the *aam aadmi*. It was with the *aam aurat* that many of us began our commitment to feminism as a movement for justice, recognising the unique capabilities of our sisters. This agenda has yet to be adopted by our current movement; if it does, I venture to suggest that it will truly revive the political power of the feminist movement in India.



Vasanth Kannabiran has been an active member of the women's movement in India for the last three decades. She has worked on issues of communal harmony and peace, and moved on to work in the area of gender and development. Originally a teacher of English, her involvement in development concerns arose as a result of her feminist praxis. Working closely with the women's programme of the Asia-South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education and the National Alliance of Women, she has been involved at the regional and national levels in work on gender and development. A founding member of Asmita Resource Centre for Women, she has written extensively on the political dimensions of gender. She has also written and produced two ballets, *Menakaa* and *Peace on Earth. A Grief to Bury*, her next publication is forthcoming.

Confessions of an Unrepentant Feminist

VASANTH KANNABIRAN

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive...

FOR a woman who was a mother of three, teaching for nearly two decades and pushing forty, these lines seemed to make such sense. I often refer to that period in my life as my *punarjanma* – it was filled with such a sense of power, of capacity, of invincibility. At the same time there was the occasional tremor at encountering new experiences and truths. After the Emergency was lifted in 1977 several women (some had been politically active in revolutionary movements) and others, feeling the need for a meaningful political forum, came together to start a women's group. I was drawn into it more through personal contacts than through any feminist activism or conviction.

For almost a decade, Stree Shakti Sanghatana politicised women's issues and changed the character of political discourse in Andhra Pradesh. As part of the second-wave women's movement that emerged throughout India in the 1970s, SSS had a distinctive political identity that was rooted in the specific political context from which it emerged.

With the birth of Stree Shakti Sanghatana – and how much we discussed the name! – new hope and meaning were born for me and, I expect, for many of us. I realised the meaning of friendship, the bonding that shared hopes and

beliefs make for, the pleasure of exploring new truths and ideas. Shredding and putting back together every experience so that it made sense. Permanent Sudoku. How does one explain those meetings, smoke-filled, where we discussed whether it was alright to smoke during a demo, or desist and get our ideas across? Whether we should call ourselves feminist or say, what's in a name? How to be uncompromising and principled without losing the public? Significantly, that public was largely male, with women often shying away from our pamphlets and our presence. Analysing the tyranny of the marriage-bed. And in the heat of that analysis, forgetting the single women among us who may not have agreed but did not dare disagree until a few years later the Single Woman became a category. Yet in taking up the issue of working women's hostels, our understanding/analysis of the rights of single women to secure housing and dignity was a radical departure from the emphasis on domestic and marital violence that dominated the movement at that time.

So much that is forgotten. So much that can never be forgotten. But how do I measure the enormous growth it provided me – a naïve, slightly foolish, unintellectual yet efficient woman. It's something I cannot describe. Our friendships in the group were strong and binding, often stifling, excluding newcomers by the group's palpable power even while welcoming them with open arms. For those of us to whom the group was everything, it was difficult to understand why people didn't want to rush in and share that excitement and feeling of liberation. Each of us had a separate circle of friends who would stay in touch at a personal level, but cautiously skirt or ignore our political selves. And we always wondered why. We thought they had not yet seen the light. Or that this was patriarchy! We were so intelligent, so dedicated, and yet so smugly unaware of what was putting other women off!

Even though our numbers were few (I don't think we ever exceeded twenty) the visibility and impact of our presence was great. The media were friendly. The political Left, ever watchful, looking at us with a friendly eye, waiting to play big brother and take us under their wing. Watching, advising, hinting at who was a Trotskyite, who an American imperialist, and who a revisionist. (No hints of the BJP or right-wing forces, however.)

In a sense our birthing began with the Mukhtad Commission, set up to enquire into the rape of Rameeza Bi and the custodial death of her husband in 1978. We hadn't yet formally come together as a group but that enquiry was like a breaking-in for many of us – revealing what it meant to be a woman. How seldom fundamental rights or the rule of law came into play was an eye-opener for many of us. That the law and the police could be so unashamedly impervious to issues of violence was a practical revelation that sent waves of utter shock at what could lie in store. For me, personally, it was also the realisation that rape does not happen with shattered glass and loud screams and a clash of cymbals in the background. No. Gang rape could be a series of drunken men coming in one after the other to finish their business while you murmured, "How many more of you?" That a rapist could actually give you a mug of water to wash yourself – an act of ultimate kindness. And the whole aura of erotic appeal that surrounds a rape victim. Men wanting to rescue and marry her. Others wanting to shelter her in their guest houses. It was as if they hoped that this woman who had actually roused drunken constables to rape and, like Helen of Troy, burnt the topless towers of Hyderabad, in whose defence so many lives were lost and the army called out, could arouse and revive their fast-fading sexual capacity. The 'glamour' of rape. Lessons learnt, that prepared us for the Mathura campaign.

Unfading memories. That first Bombay meeting of women's

movements in 1980, the beginning of the campaign to amend the rape law after the Mathura judgement. All of us paid our own and our friends' fares. About three hundred of us lived in a single hall where we slept, rolled up our beds, queued for the toilets and began the meeting at the dot of ten, with those who hadn't managed their baths participating in their nighties. There we were, looking at each other with excitement, sizing each other up, sharing, calculating – the works. It was there that we decided to draft the amendments to the rape law. I recall the tension between conflicting interests, one lot saying the burden of proof should not rest with the victim, others fearing that this would become a perfect weapon for the state to use against activists. And yet another group screaming, if we can't trust women how can we work together? And a couple of us lost our purses in that hall and couldn't believe that women in a meeting could steal from their sisters! Oh, we were an intelligent, mixed-up, committed and motley crowd.

Clear memories of how, after the whole house had come to an agreement on the amendments to be proposed, Madhu Kishwar and group (who were absent for the session) turned up the next day and insisted on reopening and revising the issues. And the endless debates over Chandralekha's Kali poster and whether women's groups should use symbols that were disempowering in essence, or use them to express Woman Power. Our palpable fear of the Gandhians – much as the public now fears Maoists. That was where I met Vibhuti Patel, Ritu Dewan, Anuradha Gandhi, Chandralekha and many, many others. The Forum Against Rape organised a public meeting where my group deputed me to speak. There was so much excitement and discussion and fun going on that I finally locked myself into a toilet for ten minutes to sort out my speech! And I still remember the clutch of men who were our audience, and when I asked who they were the Forum

women laughed and said, "Our men, who else!" It was an unforgettable experience.

What a long way we have travelled since then, and how little we realised that we had miles to go. Those deep dark woods would uncover so many truths we had taken for granted: our understanding of what secular means; how our understanding and assumptions about secularism could completely exclude and alienate many women. It was at that first Bombay meeting that I met Flavia Agnes and read the paper she distributed, and was open-mouthed at her courage in admitting that this was her story of violence and abuse.

And then the women's studies conference in Trivandrum in 1984. Our disapproval of the elaborate traditional flower and floor decorations and ceremonial lamps that seemed to trivialise our seriousness, make the conference into a mere women's festival! I wonder if any of us had the courtesy to express some appreciation for the trouble the organisers had taken to make it festive. But I do remember that the food was delicious – pineapple rice for lunch! It took us many years to admit and legitimise our need for festivals and decorations, to accept the fact that many women said they had to distance themselves from the women's movement in order to find the space for their own spiritual and emotional needs.

It was to the Trivandrum conference that I took a paper on Rameeza Bi for the law session. I still remember shrinking as Lotika Sarkar (my idol) looked at me through raised eyebrows and a trail of cigarette smoke and asked me what I could possibly have to say on the Rameeza case that was new. I wriggled in discomfort. It was here that I also saw the blue-eyed boy of the women's movement, Upendra Baxi. I watched wistfully from a distance as he generously embraced Seema Sakhare, who counted her dowry victims like a rosary of beads. It was the letter that Lotika Sarkar, Upendra Baxi and Vasudha Dhagamwar wrote about the Mathura judgement

that triggered the whole rape campaign and galvanised isolated groups into becoming the women's 'movement'. It was many years later that I finally published an article on Rameeza Bi with Kalpana [Kannabiran].

The proceedings of the Mukhtad Commission speak of the manner in which the moral economy of a minority is constructed through a discourse where the sacred and the secular are defined by the interests of a state that derive from assumptions of a majoritarian culture. The enquiry brings into focus important issues pertaining to the representation of cultural/communal identities and the place of women in these projects. The juxtaposition of the Muslim minority to the national culture has frequently been expressed in popular culture through the prostitute-courtesan/wife-mother dichotomy.⁷

We had now moved to a position where we had something to say about the gendering of law and community. Kalpana's and my writing on caste and gender, sexual harassment and violence have been a product of the movement; the excitement of sharing ideas and shaping theory with a daughter who is also a comrade has been a real gift, precious and rare.

Years later I listened incredulously to Flavia's critique of the so-called secularism of the women's movement at the women's studies conference in Jadavpur in 1991. I was amazed at our insensitivity in interpreting secularism; at our understanding of majoritarianism. I could describe my lessons learnt in the women's movement as a series of open-mouthed gapes rather than the clenched-jaw communist lessons I had observed as a child among comrades in the family.

I grew up in an atmosphere that was both intensely political – progressive on the veranda and hall – and totally traditional in the kitchen, where my grandmother ruled. However, I was

⁷ Kalpana Kannabiran and Vasanth Kannabiran, "Desecrating Graves, Defiled Bodies, Dispossessed Community," *De-Eroticizing Assault: Essays on Modesty, Honour and Power* (Calcutta: Stree, 2002, pp.182-183.)

not broken-in into the kitchen except by my love of cooking, and was generally encouraged or left alone to do as I pleased. My grandfather being a lover of books and a great believer in the value of reading, I had all the literature in the world available to me and was a bookworm, devouring Gorky, Tolstoy and Shaw along with Dickens, Oscar Wilde and Dumas (also Peter Cheney and Erle Stanley Gardner). But that was a different world, a dream world that I retreated into, and I did not connect it to my real life. Reading Marx grounded my ideas, and the women's movement provided me with a sense of power and control over my life and the direction it took in a way that went way beyond Marxism.

I grew enormously in Stree Shakti Sanghatana. The experience of interviewing the women in the Telengana peasant struggle was incredible, and the delight and exhaustion of sitting up nights with Lalita, transcribing and translating those interviews honed my interviewing and translating skills, that I have put to good use since. The interviews were included in a book, *We Were Making History...* that Kali published in 1989. Travelling, staying in villages, going on fact-finding missions, preparing reports and press releases was all in a day's work. And from my sheltered existence as a teacher of English in a women's college, entering the politics of the women's movement was a release undreamt of. We formed strong bonds, friendships which endured and sustained us through many hardships – and later dissolved at the snap of a finger. The sense of failure that haunted one then was probably similar to what many of the women who come to us for help feel about their broken marriages. Guilt and inadequacy and a sense of shame. And this has happened with groups all over the country. One problem that is common to most women's groups is the tendency to police each other and the passionate attachments that spring up between us, often good, more often disastrous.

In Stree Shakti Sanghatana each of us branched off into different areas so that we could disperse a feminist perspective across a wider field. I concentrated on Hyderabad Ekta, an organisation that had come into existence in the 1980s. Hyderabad Ekta worked for communal harmony, holding public meetings and rallies, protests against communal violence, sending fact-finding teams into riot-stricken areas, publishing reports, and holding press conferences. One hilarious incident in the course of that work took place when a young man, an earnest worker, arrived late and burst into a serious meeting. When asked why he was so late, he said with innocent pride that he had just joined the BJP! Whereas we were stunned by his announcement, he saw no contradiction between working for communal harmony and membership of a right-wing Hindu party that had been responsible for a lot of communal violence. The experience of working in riot-affected areas and talking to victims, men and women, has been invaluable; the acceptability I gained then has held to this day and is something I treasure.

It was during post-riot work that I realised you can't just *speak* for peace, you are forced to judge and you have to take positions. Gradually, the realisation dawned on us that communal parties addressed practical problems and urgent needs so promptly that they could easily put us out of business in any post-riot attempt to build peace. Later, when Navroze Contractor and Deepa Dhanraj made a film on the riots, *Kya Hua Iss Shahar Ko?* (produced by the Deccan Development Society, where I was working at the time), I understood how useful that exposure had been; being associated with that film was an incredible experience.

I was president of the Telengana Affiliated Colleges Teachers' Association for one term, when more and more women teachers came out on the streets to protest bad working conditions and poor pay scales, more than ever before in the

history of that association. However, I left after I realised that political issues were not a priority with them, only pay scales and arrears. While this is undoubtedly important it was not my ideal, but heading that association taught me many things about negotiating, bargaining and mobilising.

In Stree Shakti Sanghatana we believed that because a large number of women were willing to identify and work against 'social evils' like dowry deaths and domestic violence, we should set up a dowry death investigating committee which would draw in middle class women and leave us to pursue more political and intellectual activities. The committee was active for a year or two and then died a natural death.

Soon several factors took over – resentments, differences, divisions, all the inclusions and exclusions we had ignored or pretended didn't exist. The principle, undoubtedly valuable as a principle, but back-breaking in practice, that all of us could do everything. While the street plays and rallies and songs were fun and liberating for many of us, shifting to another level of activity like writing or publishing caused several contradictions to surface.

One of the consequences of women becoming a 'development concern' was that feminists like us were drawn into development work to give it a gender perspective. The rural experience for someone like me who was town bred, and the ability to communicate with village women easily and effectively was heady, but it was tempered by the realisation that the power to implement change and be heard in all-male environments comes only when you control the funds. That when push comes to shove, issues of violence and abuse get swept under the carpet in large institutions. Actually, some of my colleagues sincerely believed that child abuse and rape do not occur in 'pure' rural settings, that the sudden spurt in such stories was largely of my making! An experience that was also part of my growth.

During the Eighties I enjoyed writing a weekly column for a Telugu daily, *Andhra Jyothi*, on the women's page, sandwiched between beauty tips, recipes and health features. I learnt a lot from it because my readers taught me to respond to their needs. The column was simple and clear, but when I look back at the issues I covered in those columns I realise how wide-ranging, straightforward yet deeply political those articles were. Everybody who could read seemed to read them. One moment of total astonishment came at a March 8 meeting in Warangal where a young man spoke and made some very good points; it gradually dawned on me that he was summing up most of my recent articles! When the next speaker also began to quote me extensively, I found I had little left to say! Much later I started a series, now promoted to the edit page, of *Vaaritha*. This series in English, translated by Volga, was much more serious in tone and content and was widely read; working with Volga made it easy to ensure that the complexities of the argument did not get lost in translation.

The ability to translate ideas that are difficult and groundbreaking has been very important for the movement. Of course, there was also the despair we felt when groups oversimplified complex formulations and reduced everything to patriarchy. Patriarchy became a mantra that explained everything under the sun, and a concept as useful as gender was seized with greed so that a new breed of gender trainers, armed with laptops and lessons, emerged to 'engender development', leeching the concept of its political content, presenting it in a sanitised, acceptable form to development groups and funders. This is not to deny that some good work did not get done – I was a gender trainer myself for a couple of decades, travelling across the country to work with different groups and, as part of Asia-South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE), work in the whole region. What was most satisfying was that a whole generation

of women emerged who grew into leaders of women's development groups all over.

This has been for me one of the greatest satisfactions of the women's movement. The teaching, the research, the analysis and, last but not least, the confidence in your ability to use your mind. I could never have described myself as a writer, a poet or a scholar but for the women's movement. But, alas, for the tiny fraction like me who needed a push, there were thousands of self-proclaimed women's studies scholars and gender analysts who literally crawled out of the woodwork. Women's Studies had arrived with an army of mercenaries ready to capture the market! By the early Eighties we were ready to institutionalise so that we could put our learning to better use. Anveshi was set up and I remember Susie Tharu saying regretfully, "Look at what has happened to us! We were a movement and now we have become an institution."

The other face of the movement is the divisions and conflicts, the differences, both ideological and personal, that cut at its very roots. It would have been so reassuring to see this as the work of the foreign hand – or as part of the patriarchal project. But the power struggles and insecurities and undercutting that were so much a part of mainstream politics were also part of the women's movement. Sacrifice and sharing are far easier in struggle than in success. Time and again I was stunned at what we are capable of doing to each other and to ourselves. I think the number of breakdowns and depressions that spring from the illusions we foster about the women's movement probably rival those caused by marriage and life-long partnerships. This is because of the passion and zeal we bring to the movement and the inevitable breakdown resulting from human failure. Yes, that is it. We forget we are human and push ourselves to a point where we either destroy ourselves or those around us. The fact that there is also faith and trust and love built in makes it that much harder. And

when you build an institution you tend to prioritise the institution over individual needs.

By this time my personal growth had suddenly stopped and I felt I was hibernating, in spite of the significant work that was being turned out by the Anveshi group. My honeymoon with rural development through the Deccan Development Society had ended, and along with a few others I felt it was time to start a centre that would cater to the needs of countless women who sought counselling or legal aid. And so Asmita was set up in 1991. In its nineteen years of existence (which drew on my years with Stree Shakti Sanghatana, Anveshi, Ekta and other groups) I have realised how good it is to have a peer group to work with again. To be able to test your assumptions and conclusions on your colleagues, to work productively as a team, is a source of immense satisfaction. More importantly, the fact that you can enjoy your work and not be tied down to a meaningless routine is very invigorating. That some of us did not actively pursue a career or promotions but still achieved a degree of recognition, was a constant source of wonder and annoyance to our conventional friends. But to do what you believe in and enjoy doing it is one of the luxuries of the women's movement – or any movement, for that matter.

Another gift of the women's movement has been the opportunity to translate, and find that I have a gift for picking up voices. This began with the interviews of the women in the Telengana peasant struggle, and later I was happy that I was able to translate all of (revolutionary poet) Varavar Rao's articles from jail for *The Indian Express*. Meera (Velayudhan) once said that I could stop everything and just translate, especially dalit women's writing. I enjoy translating, but also feel that I must keep some time for the things I want to write. *Want to write*. Where did the desire or confidence to 'want' come from if not from the women's movement?

The anti-arrack struggle in Andhra and our involvement in it was yet another milestone in our growth. This historic struggle is the story of landless rural dalit women who rose spontaneously, drawing poor women from across the state into a struggle that spread rapidly like a forest fire, leaving the government bewildered and shaken and rendering its machinery utterly ineffective. While the state, the media and the middle class supported the struggle from a moral position on the evils of alcohol, the women's demand to ban liquor was a political one. Questions of gender and politics and, more importantly, the culture of politics, acquired new meanings through this struggle because, for the first time, the imperatives of working class women determined the contours of political space. Between May–June 1992 the struggle was confined to one village; by the end of July, two hundred shops had been closed, the wave soon spread to eight hundred villages, and five hundred shops were forcibly shut down. We were called upon to join and address rallies across the state; we met women who had participated in the struggle, listened to their experiences and conducted interviews. We visited almost eighty villages in eight districts, and the experience of documenting that struggle, *Saramsam*, provided us with the confidence and background for our own work with rural groups.

In 1995 Asmita published *Sarihaddulu Leni Sandhyalu* (*Twilight Without Boundaries*), a feminist theory anthology in Telugu, the very first of its kind. It reviewed the women's movement from the specificities of Andhra Pradesh. What we sought to address in it was the fact that feminism goes beyond the 'woman question' and looks at equal citizenship, the need to obliterate the distinction between public and private, and make the family a subject of public discourse. The articles in it dealt with diversity issues including caste, religion, gender and their intersection as integral components of feminism.

On July 17, 1996, we organised a state-wide rally protesting

the government's decision to repeal prohibition. A week earlier we had called women representatives across the state and briefed them on the economic and political compulsions of the decision. We expected about a thousand women to turn up, perhaps two. We arranged the venue for the public meeting, made sure we had enough food packets. Twelve thousand women turned up! They just poured in, and the streets of Hyderabad were a riot of colour. This rally took place under the NAWO (National Alliance of Women) banner with three colours for the three regions – Telengana, Rayalseema and Coastal Andhra. The streets were jammed and we had to keep getting food packets for all the women who came. The meeting went on right through the day, and the police actually helped transport women to railway stations and bus stands just to make sure that the city was emptied! *And there was no media coverage!* Not a single TV channel or newspaper made even a passing reference to one of the biggest mobilisations in the state. It was a total blackout. The government did not dare lift the ban immediately; it waited for a few weeks before doing so quietly.

One of the most satisfying aspects of our work in Asmita has been the tremendous outreach to rural groups, and the adult education and capacity-building among men and women from district towns and villages. Our area of involvement kept expanding gradually, not because of any special ability on our part but because groups demanded that we equip ourselves to cater to their needs. So whether it was human rights for HIV positive people or those with disability; LGBT groups; or women displaced by conflict or development, we were forced to rise to the occasion, answer their questions and come up with strategies for support and solidarity. I remember how distressing it was in the initial days of Stree Shakti Sanghatana when we were expected, as a small group, to respond to huge disasters like Bhopal when we scarcely had

the resources to build our own capacity. There were constant demands for solidarity and action from Left groups, and we were torn by conflicting priorities. We fought any attempt to be co-opted by the Left and were known to be individually sympathetic to the Left but markedly anti-Left as a group, a result of the Left's intolerance of any criticism, a habit which still continues. On the whole, we have been relentless in raising questions about the gender perspective of the Left and in our criticism of many of their methods. I believe that the women's movement, at least in Andhra Pradesh, has provided invaluable support to, and space for, women in revolutionary movements to raise questions within their own parties, even when not formally associated with us.

And then, of course, there was Beijing, 1995. Beijing was different because it reached thousands of women across the country who had never heard of a UN conference on women. Unlike the earlier Mexico and Nairobi conferences, Beijing became a household word. The best example of that was when the women's sangham from the Addagutta slum was protesting the rape of an attendant by a security guard in a lift of the Gandhi Hospital. They stormed into the Registered Medical Officer's room and then into the neighbouring police station shouting, "In Beijing the governments are busy talking about our rights and here you dare allow such things to happen!" These were domestic labourers and petty vendors who felt that Beijing was for and about *their* rights.

One of the good things that happened pre-Beijing was the setting up of a Coordination Unit in Delhi to ensure that the concerns of women across the country were heard at Beijing. The periodic issue-based meetings and the coming together of women from different parts of the country was a brilliant move on the part of funding agencies. It suddenly opened the gates to women of all classes and interests to intervene, and it dissolved the invisible barrier between Delhi and Bombay,

and the rest of India. What Sunita Dhar and her team did was to systematically involve as many groups as possible, and Beijing was the richer for it. Regardless of what we think of UN conferences and the role of funding agencies, the way women's groups rallied around Beijing and the skill with which the Platform for Action was publicised and used as an advocacy tool in campaigns around the country, remains unmatched.

It was when the Coordination Unit was to be disbanded that those of us who were focal points for our states realised that we did not want to lose the contact or the networking that our coming together had made possible. The process finally saw its culmination at the Conference of Commitment in August 1995 in New Delhi. Over one thousand grassroots women from all over India came together for it, and the National Advisory Committee on Women played a vital role in bringing the Government of India and representatives of the women's movement in India onto a common platform to dialogue on what we needed to do for women's development. The success of this dialogue culminated in the five commitments that the Government of India made at Beijing.

Towards the end of December 1995 the National Advisory Committee proposed that it redefine its role and vision in the post-Beijing phase, and it now came to be known as the National Alliance of Women (NAWO). Ruth Manorama was elected president, and NAWO has been able to work effectively in different regions – we set up a fact-finding group to investigate the attacks on churches in Dangs, Gujarat; we sent solidarity teams to Orissa after communal attacks occurred there; we have been effective in voicing our political concerns as a national network on issues critical to the movement – political participation, violence, conflict, displacement or survival.

Each new initiative drew us in, and the networking across

the country on a trial, a hearing, a campaign or a festival brought more and more groups together. But for the women's movement I would not have made so many friends across the country, the region and the world. There is a pleasure that is difficult to describe in meeting people who share an ideal. The warmth and hope that are generated by the fact that so many others share your faith (or a part of it) and the sense of community are great. Kamla Bhasin's songs were always a source of joy and celebration, cutting across barriers of language and region. The creativity that the women's movement filled most of us with, its sheer energy, sense of purpose and meaning are incredible. And they outlived much of the fatigue and burn-out that were also a part of it.

Systematically translating and making material available to the public in Telugu has been a critical activity at Asmita. Our translation of the Combahee River Collective's statement provided the impetus for dalit, bahujan and minority (Telugu-speaking) women's groups to question the class and caste assumptions of the women's movement. One of the key problems we face is to provide support without assuming control, while retaining our own independent position on issues. There is always a tension that political correctness imposes on articulate groups who are expected to take a position for or against something that is problematic.

In October 2004, the peace process between the state government and Naxalite groups was initiated at the instance of the Committee of Concerned Citizens. A historic event, it was watched with close interest by all groups, democratic and otherwise, in Andhra and the rest of the country. As feminists engaged critically with revolutionary politics and writing on the one hand, and actively involved in human rights advocacy on the other, we went to the meeting convened by Maoists with women's groups during the peace talks with the government. Volga, Kalpana and I drafted a document that

stated our concerns regarding the revolutionary movement and its gender perspective. We handed it over personally. During their conversations with the more than hundred women gathered there, the leaders admitted that their lack of clarity on the women's question came from the patriarchal and feudal backgrounds that the party cadre belonged to. We published our statement in the local press and in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. I must admit that, notwithstanding our serious reservations about the counter-violence of Maoist groups, meeting the leaders and finding them soft-spoken, polite and immensely patient, was a memorable experience.

One difficulty that we constantly confront in Asmita is that of a second line of leadership. We agonise over the gap, political and ideological, between the old guard and new entrants – it is possible now to work on women's issues purely as professionals. It has been difficult to come to terms with this, to learn to respect the skills women bring to their jobs and to go along with them. We also realise that the second line leadership we had hoped to create is not to be found within the organisation itself but is scattered across the state, heading institutions and making a difference.

When there were conflicts in Asmita we wondered why these were occurring when there was so much space for everyone. It was only when we realised that the tensions sprang from personal lives and backgrounds, and that it isn't easy for everyone to make sense of the personal in political terms, that we stopped our self-flagellation. This is not to say that we do not use power. We do use and misuse it, whether we claim it is in the interest of 'national security', institutional stability or whatever! We were different once, but not any longer, and that is a reality to ponder.

We moved from one issue to the next till we were catapulted from domestic violence and dowry deaths to communal violence, displacement and militarisation. In 1999 we

collaborated with an international free-speech network of women writers called Women's WORLD, which was analysing the gendered nature of censorship across the world in diverse cultural, social and political contexts. Women's WORLD (India) initiated a major project of conducting workshops with hundreds of writers over the next ten years, and produced some of the soundest theory on censorship existing today. It also made critical interventions on the issue: when Taslima Nasrin was attacked at a public meeting in Hyderabad in 2007, Asmita filed a petition in the high court of Hyderabad seeking the removal of the four legislators who led the attack, and cancelling the registration of the All India Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen by the Election Commission. What should be done when sitting members of the legislature or parliament direct a mob to physically attack a writer, artist or any other person? The case is resting in court!

The groups in Andhra have produced so much work that was pioneering. *We Were Making History* from Stree Shakti Sanghatana, *Women Writing in India*, from Anveshi, *Mabilavarnam/Womanscape* from Asmita, are all examples of the energy and inspiration provided by the movement. This, apart from all the individual writing that many of us have done. Establishing political and conceptual clarity is important for survival; it has helped in bringing a gender perspective into the political discourse of Andhra Pradesh, and that is one historic aspect of our role. The other has been the documenting of women's histories and movements.

One thing I must mention is being chosen as one of the thousand Peace Women who were jointly nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005. I felt totally unworthy and consented reluctantly, but the love and warmth that poured in from every corner of the state, with hundreds of women saying, "If you are chosen it is as if we have been chosen," that was the peace prize for me. Our most ordinary actions

sometimes have an impact we cannot quite measure, and that is humbling.

My latest passion has been writing and directing ballets. That they have won acclaim in international women playwrights' conferences is the icing on the cake. To work with musicians, composers, choreographers from very different backgrounds and try to produce our best because of its sheer beauty and value, is a great feeling. I have worked with women in the movement who shared my values, but to collaborate with people who have very different world-views yet share a commitment to the task at hand, is something else. Despite all the tensions and high pressure that show business carries it has been well worth it.

Finally, what did I gain from all this? A sense of self, a sense of worth, a sense of relevance, plenty of love and gratitude from thousands of young women whose inchoate desires and needs I seemed to voice. A feeling that life has been worth living. What more can one ask for?



Sheba Chhachhi works with lens-based images, both still and moving, investigating questions of gender, ecology, violence and visual culture. Her works address the question of transformation, personal and collective memory, retrieving the marginal, and the play between the mythic and the social. A long-time chronicler of the women's movement in India, as both photographer and activist, she began developing collaborative, staged photographic portraits with her subjects in the early Nineties, moving on to photo-based installations. Sheba places the

photographic image in space with video, sound, light, objects, text. She has developed a new artistic language - that of the moving image light-box, which uses a series of still and moving layers of photographic images to almost cinematic effect. Public art interventions are an important part of Sheba's practice, in Delhi and elsewhere.

My feet slip on the cold metal table. I brace myself, this has to be done fast - we've somehow talked our way into the morgue at AIIMS, to photograph the body of a young woman murdered by her husband. I have only a few minutes, this will be evidence.

She is beautiful, severely bruised. The long vertical suture on a body still full of promise. I do not have to close my eyes to see it, even now, thirty years later.

There is little hope of justice. The husband, the in-laws, the police as well as the doctors are in collusion.

Her mother begins to haunt me. She wants these photos. I believe she should not see her daughter in this form, I refuse. She comes to Saheli, finds her way to my studio in Jangpura, calls me again and again.

I tell her the photos are with the lawyer, that I do not have them, that the negatives are also in the case file. She will not take no for an answer. She is obsessed with the photograph of her dead daughter, she wants to see it, just once.

Despite everything, I never show them to her.

Years later, I find that the negatives have disappeared.

THE shutter clicks, an efficient, attuned rhythm. Absorbed, very concentrated, I turn the spool and the roll has finished! The familiar hazards of using cheap, re-spooled bulk film... I am precariously perched on a barricade, squeezed between two policemen, facing the demonstration as it approaches.

A press photographer close to me silently hands me two rolls of hi-speed, expensive Tri X, in unusual professional solidarity. Equally silently, I load the film and carry on. Shortly after, to his surprise, I jump over the barricade and join the demonstration, shouting slogans.

It's 1981, the height of the anti-dowry campaign. More and more women join, the demonstrations swell, the rage and the refusal to accept the killing of women for dowry is implacable.



1981

Six years later, I infiltrate the Rani Sati celebration procession in the guise of a Press photographer. My spying is useful, a tiny group of us manage to intercept this annual valorisation of Sati and briefly disrupt the ritual.

The bewildered women see me join the 'troublemakers'

The following year we return, in full force. The procession is more elaborate, grand with elephants, brass bands and tableaux. Women in bridal finery sit above cardboard flames while the cry of "Rani Sati ki jai!" is shouted on the megaphone. Suddenly, on the same megaphone, we hear the same voice calling out anti-dowry slogans! Each float carries a banner declaring anti-dowry sentiments.

The first taste of what will be a series of appropriations of the movement...



1986/7





1986



Poster by Lifetools (Sheba & Jogi), 1988



Bharti, 1996



Bharti, 2002

BIDYA suddenly bursts into the '80's feminist song "Tod tod ke bandhano ko...", as Bharti's body is carried to the crematorium. She stops short - and the chant of "Lal Salaam, Comrade" takes over, to be replaced a while later by "Nari Shakti Zindabad!", a curious contrapuntal between the autonomous women's movement and the independent Left, between urban feminist community-based health workers and rural activists from the land rights struggle.

We sing songs from both movements, holding alliances, affiliations, autonomies in a productive tension, as she did, over more than thirty years of dedicated activism.

Just a week ago Bharti was at the Free Binayak Sen sit in, at our now designated protest site, Jantar Mantar. Less than a year ago, I photographed her in her wheelchair at the same place, this time at the barricades on International Women's Day, 2010.

An almost forgotten self rises as I call out the chant - flushed with the energy, the weight, the warmth and the power of singing together, chanting together. What I took for granted in the '80's and '90's, becomes rare and precious in 2011.

HER voice falters, tentative, coloured by a sudden rush of anger. A voice that has learnt to name, to speak out. I, in turn, speak. The knowing in her eyes.

Stories told, stories heard, pain shared. Hands that hold and ease. Bodies moving, dancing, faces flushed with song. No, not simply angry women. Our anger is no longer simple. Growing, digging deep, exploring ways to re-imagine ourselves.

This kinship has a substantial quality, forged through processes of shared reflection, not by blood or class or profession. We are each other's primary resource; all other forms of prostheses become secondary.

In the midst of the disappointments, the betrayals, the self-serving tendencies, the splits, the fights, I return to this shared subjectivity.

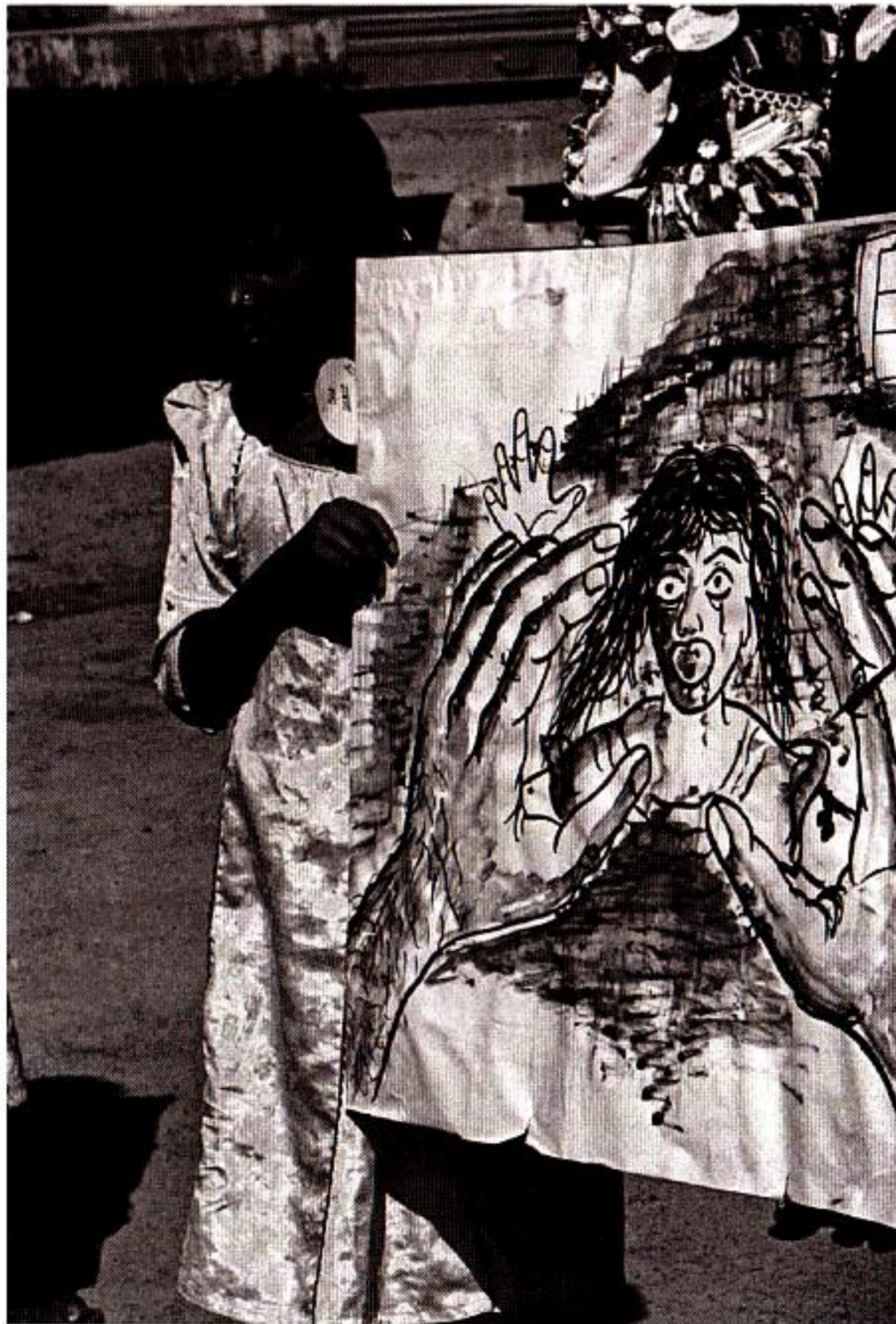




It was not planned. Suddenly, the small, peaceful, protest outside the Union Carbide office on Parliament Street erupted. Women gas victims from Bhopal ran up into the building and began smashing the office. As suddenly, we were back on the street, burning an effigy. I joined hands and voice with the small group around the fire. Like an electrical impulse, a kind of heat travelled from the bodies next to me and filled me. We were welded into one seething mass. The police started beating the only male fellow protester. I inserted myself, thinking that they would not strike a woman. The lathi smashed down on my shoulder. With a howl of primal fury I grabbed the cop, tore his shirt off. He ran. I chased him down the road, filled with blood-lust, till someone pulled me back.

Shaking, I realised that in that rage all politics had abandoned me. There was no consciousness of the issue, of justice, of rights, in that moment I was no different from the mobs who had massacred Sikhs a few months earlier, in November 1984.

The small space that I had for counter-violence, armed revolution, 'direct action', disappeared forever. Many *companeras* accused me of 'Gandhianism', asked if I wished to 'turn the other cheek' in relation to state and patriarchal violence. But my absolute pacifism was no longer negotiable.



THE fierce noonday sun beats down as we move through New Seemapuri. Lata, even more fierce, and afraid. She was the first to make it public. Then the delicate, difficult process through which other girls, young women, skilfully helped by Sabla Sangh, opened up this most secret violence, right in the heart of the family.

We are a small, brave group of women, mostly local. I move, as always, half a kilometre ahead of the demonstration, photographing it as it approaches, then running to the middle, the end and then back again.

I catch sight of the faces of bystanders as they see the banner coming down the street. The men, boys, shift uneasily, look away.

Will they taunt these very women the next time one of them crosses their path, alone, without the strength of numbers, megaphone, banners? A few hours later, tucked into Rani's tiny but blessedly cool room, I ask who has drawn the poster. This time I have had nothing to do with its making.



1990

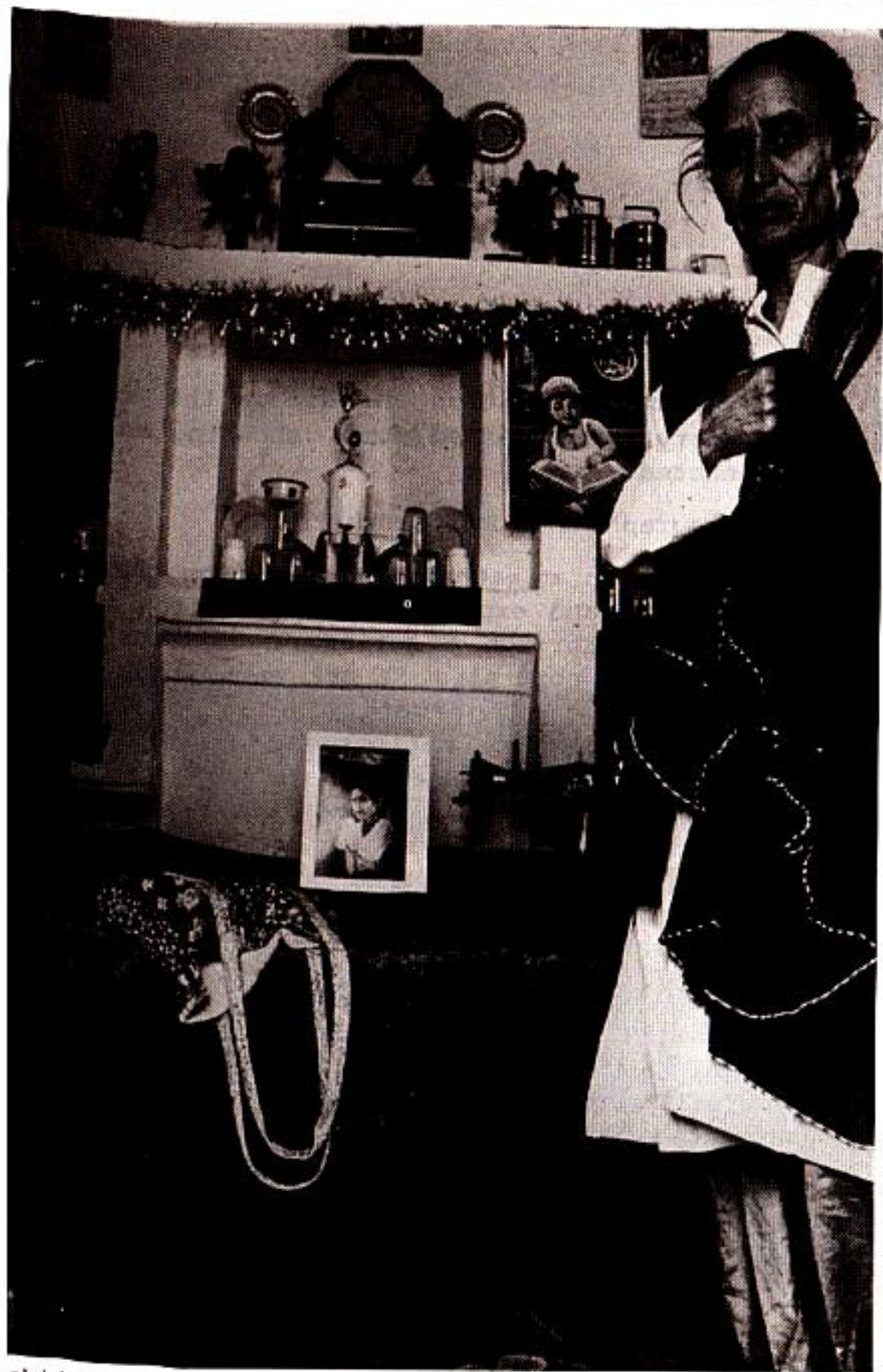
THE cameramen position and direct the women. The angry eyes, raised fist, shouting mouth is enacted.

I photograph the photographers.

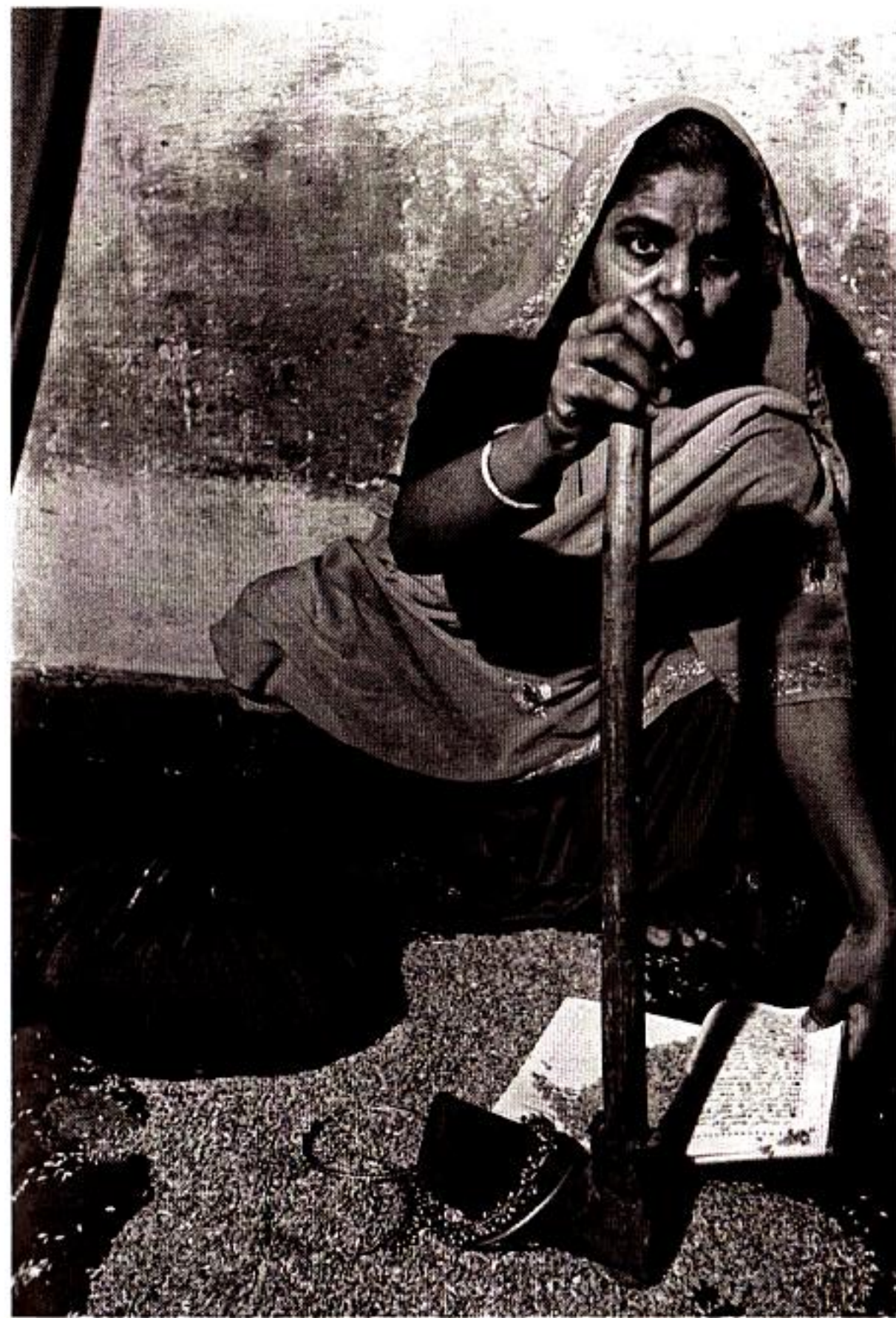
And then turn my attention away from the public mode and explore the subjective, the inner life, through a series of collaborative staged portraits. I ask each woman to choose objects, images and places: Apa brings a small hut, meticulously made from a shoebox, glue and tinsel paper, her unworn burkha; Shanti borrows an axe, spreads wheat on the floor, opens her diary; Sharada offers a DTC bus, a tiffin box, and a set of glass marbles; Satyarani her daughter's wedding sari on the steps of the Supreme Court.

Each brings photographs - photos within photos, performing the self at multiple levels. Together, we tell their stories - strength and vulnerability, contradictions, ambiguities - desires, fantasies, memories...

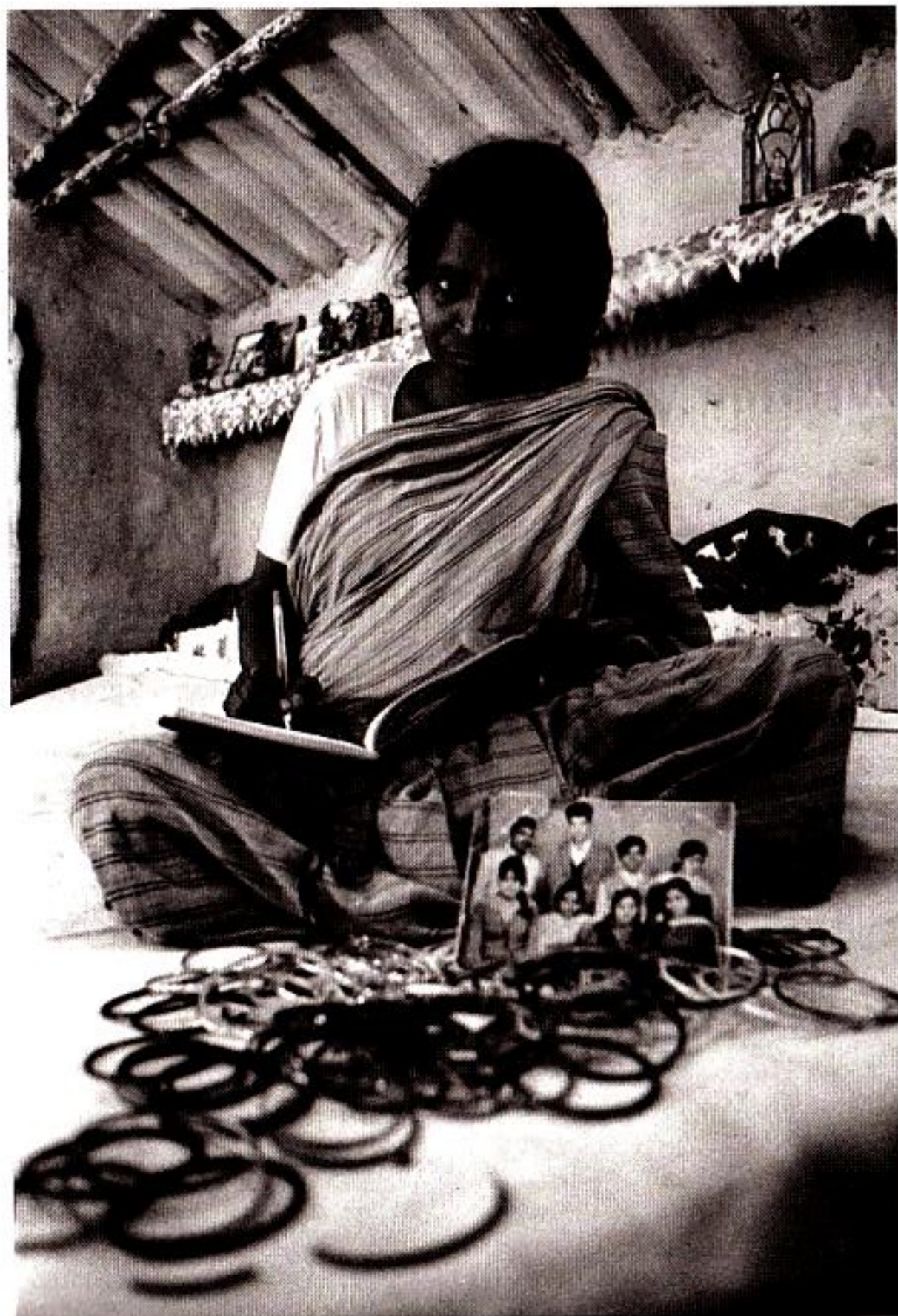
Shanti puts me into her theatre, photographs me with her props.



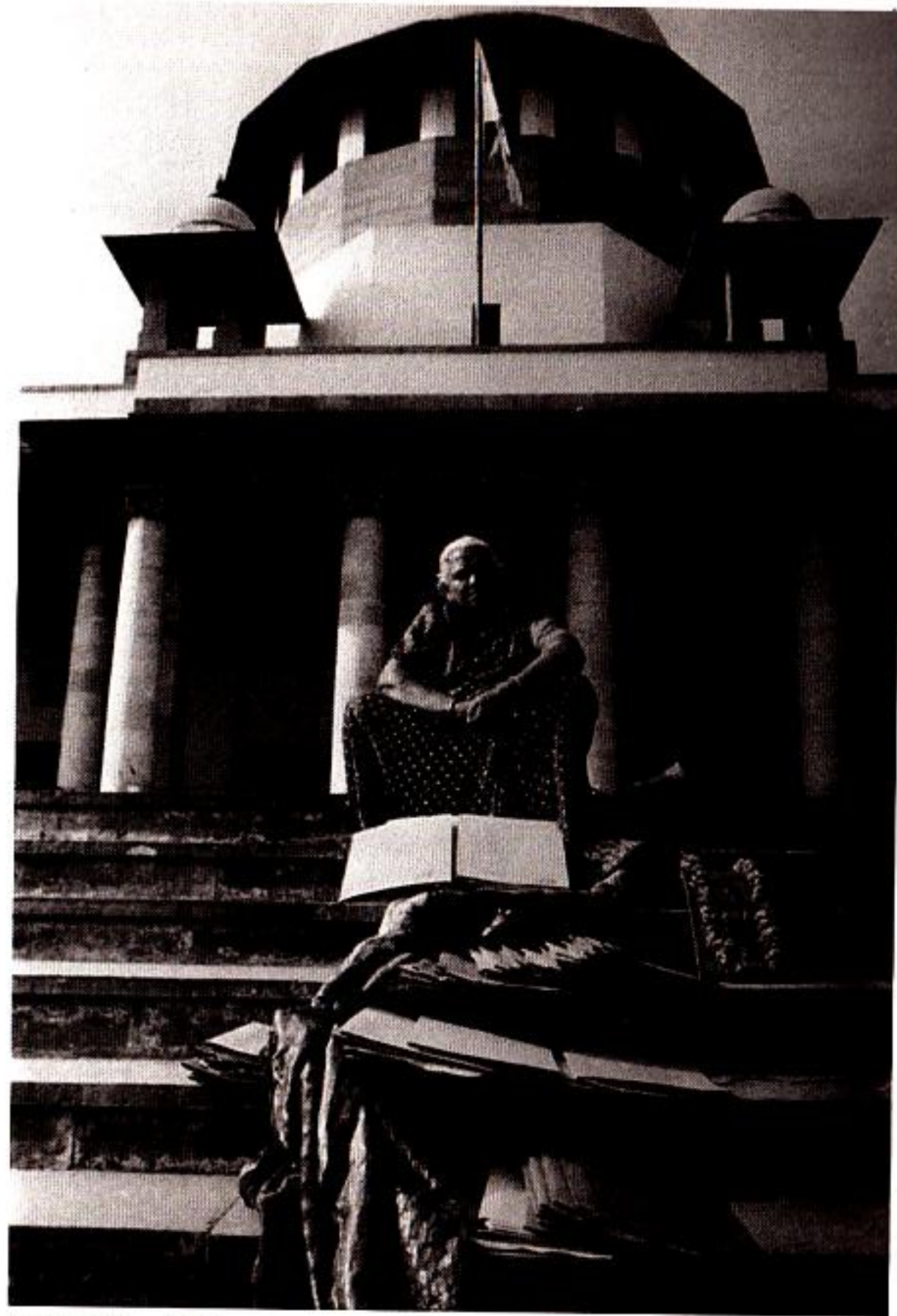
Ahjahan Apa, 1991



Shanti, 1991



Devi Kripa, 1991



Satyarani, 1991



Sheba by Shanti, 1991



Pamela Philipose has been both an observer of, and a participant in, the women's movement from the heady days of the late Seventies, when outrage over the Mathura rape case coalesced into social activism. Writing on women – as a media professional and as a woman – has been a life-altering experience for her; in many senses the story came home, changing ways of seeing and living. At present, Pamela is the director of Women's Feature Service, New Delhi, and was for many years a senior associate editor with *The Indian Express*, writing on development, gender and politics. A winner of awards for outstanding journalism, she continues to focus on gender concerns.

Pavement Visions, Street-corner Dreams

PAMELA PHILIPOSE

IF Bombay had not existed, I may never have become a feminist. And the “women’s movement” – a wholly inadequate, slightly pedestrian but convenient portmanteau of a term – would have remained for me a distant, bookish thing.

The train journey to the metropolis began with a letter from *The Times of India* saying that it was happy to offer me a slot as a trainee journalist inside its commodious portals; it ended with a spectacular view, trifurcated by the bars of the compartment windows, of a beehive of human bodies inside the rumbling belly of Victoria Terminus, the final disembarking point. It was as if life’s iron hook had picked me and my powder blue suitcase with slightly dented corners bearing a name in bold letters, and dropped us into a swirling, noisy space that had no boundaries or definitions, no neat binaries of outsider/insider, privileged/non-privileged, or even male/female. One sensed the crowd instantly and spontaneously, but making sense of it needed insights that the city yielded only if you came to acquire a stake in it. Just living within its diverse environs, amidst its variegated people, forced one to confront human life in the raw, brace up to a world full of moments invested with uncertainty and mutation.

One such apocalyptic point arrived a few months after I came to the city on June 27, 1975. It was the day after the declaration of Emergency, and walking into the offices of the

Old Lady of Boribunder – as *The Times of India* offices just across the road from the Victoria Terminus were called – was like arriving at someone’s funeral. Everybody and everything, even the teleprinters usually rocking with the incessant clickety-clack of breaking news, seemed to be in prayer. My words sounded loud and brash in my own ears: “What’s happening? Why is it so quiet?” The lowliest sub-editor in the *Evening News* pool did not look up from the copy she was editing as she whispered, “Emergency has been declared.” Emergency was something they hadn’t taught in journalism school, but whatever it was, it seemed suddenly to drain the profession of its texture, colour, *râison d’être*. It compelled someone like me who had not thought too much about the world beyond the immediate, who was singularly under-educated about rights and liberties, to consider the powerlessness of people without both, for perhaps the first time in a lifespan of two decades.

Soon leaflets arrived and were being surreptitiously passed around, acquaintances disappeared for hours to attend what seemed to be important meetings, animated bursts of discussion would end when someone entered the room. Apathy to this subterranean buzz appeared to be an inadequate response. Something had to be done to be a part of whatever was going on. I came happily chasing the sheen and cadence of words into a newspaper, but found that they did not serve me in understanding the situation that had developed. There was a new vocabulary waiting to be discovered. Unfamiliar words like “resistance” and “revolution” were being bandied around, but what did they really signify? I needed to learn a great deal, but for that I had to unlearn almost as much.

Before long I found myself part of a tiny group who swore by Marx and Mao and vowed to fight the Emergency. It extolled its members to discard their bourgeois conditioning and values, re-educate themselves and work for the liberation

of the toiling classes. The self-doubt and hesitation that had once plagued me suddenly vaporised. It was as if I could move into an already well-furnished intellectual space that provided both an unassailable interpretation of the world and a comfortable sense of personal purpose. We were quickly convinced that all the truly great people of the world were on our side, while on the other were serried ranks of rogues and charlatans, profiteers and exploiters. To give ourselves a voice we began a thirty-page tract, *The Communard*, termed a "Bulletin of the Front Against Fascism", which would later transmogrify, immediately after the Emergency was lifted, into a slightly bigger publication called *Spartacus*, with the words "*The philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it – Karl Marx*" emblazoned in red letters on its cover page.

The first issue of our publication indicated that the main task was to hone a theoretical response to the ruling class at a time when fundamental rights stood suspended, and the existing Left parties were letting down the revolutionary cause. When theory grips the masses it becomes material force, Marx had written, but nobody – and certainly not the established, weak-kneed communist parties of the day – had an adequate theoretical understanding of current politics. It fired words like canon balls into the ether. There was, for instance, this irate comment on the Emergency in that first edition:

Thus, the people have lost their fundamental right to speech while Mama's Little Boy can bore one to death with inane exhortations. Thus, the workers cannot exercise their basic trade union rights while the capitalists can continue to lay off and lock out the workers, plunging many families into hunger and starvation... Emergency has taught the working class more politics than many a study class... The people are getting weary and angry. Therefore, the sword has to be sharpened further and new weapons too must be forged...

It seemed a dangerous but peculiarly reassuring thing to do: slave for the censored bourgeois press overground and cyclostyle one's 'illegal' rage for private circulation underground. There was heady satisfaction in reinterpreting for the readers of the Bulletin the news that had been tamed and treated for bourgeois consumption in the mass-circulated mainstream newspapers. When a coal mine got flooded at Chasnala in December of 1975, *The Communard* vented its ire against the term "tragedy" used to describe the disaster in most newspaper reports: "Chasnala is not 'tragedy', it is murder. The comprador-bureaucrat-landlord regime in its crazy greed for profits has sacrificed 376 lives at the altar of Capital..."

The totalising world view in which the solution to every social phenomenon was linked to the revolutionary seizure of state power, was simple, direct and easy to comprehend and imbibe. The surety of the idea that once the Revolution was waged and won, once the bourgeois state had withered away, the utopia of total equality would be upon us, made us singularly disdainful of all those who did not embrace such an obvious idea, who persisted in conforming to the agendas of the ruling classes.

But apparent and hidden contradictions kept surfacing all the time. For one, there was the relative privilege in which we lived when compared to those whose cause we so fervently espoused. The more we tried to be like the slum dweller and factory worker, the more evident was the fact that we were inhabitants of a completely different world. Every time we ate a dish of chicken fried rice in a Colaba restaurant it felt like a major class betrayal. Then there were the neat, unquestioned divisions along gender lines that marked the way we functioned as a group. While the 'intellectuals' – invariably male – would effortlessly inhabit a superior realm and discuss weighty matters amongst themselves, we – invariably female – would cook the khichdi for rough-and-

ready meals and beseech those who intellectually laboured for us to eat up before the rice became inedible lumps of cold putty. While the intellectuals – invariably male – wrote the main pieces for the Bulletin, we – invariably female – would selflessly breathe in the fumes of correction fluid and wear our fingers down typing onto stencils the never-ending pages of handwritten paper handed over to us. It never struck any of us to demur, because we understood that this was for a cause far larger than a few individuals and their petty discomforts.

But for all that, the gender divide never really went away. Perhaps this was because gender consciousness, unlike our carefully cultivated and slightly uncertain working class consciousness, was as intrinsic to our everyday experience as a walk down the road. Of course, since our group prided itself on its intellectual understanding of the many aspects of human exploitation, there were study classes on “women’s liberation”. These began with readings from *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, that came to us in the bright red, cloth-bound volumes of the selected works of Marx and Engels which Progress Publishers (Moscow) made available at an amazingly low price through People’s Publishing House outlets in the city. “The overthrow of mother-right was the world historic defeat of the female sex. The man seized the reins in the house also, the woman was degraded, enthralled, the slave of the man’s lust, a mere instrument for breeding children,” wrote Engels. August Bebel argued in another volume that the progress of a society should be measured by the status of its women, while Clara Zetkin – who seemed far more accessible and certainly less hirsute than many other revolutionary stalwarts – pointed to the particular attractiveness of women’s labour for the capitalists, not just because it was priced lower but because of the “greater submissiveness of women”.

But where did the road from these great early revolutionary theorists take us? While their work concentrated our minds on issues of social justice, they seemed to speak for an abstract sea of people representing “the masses”. Their words opened exciting new ideological vistas but did not help us understand any better our personal realities or our experiences as individual women. The leadership of our group was constantly alert to any act or word that betrayed “petty bourgeois deviationism”; any drift to “western style feminism” required to be severely checked. The very word “patriarchy” was anathema. But even Engels hinted at patriarchy, didn’t he, when he talked about the overthrow of “mother-right”, we said, only to be met by a lengthy exposition on how privileging women’s issues over class issues was a patently middle class indulgence that smacked of a dangerous individualism which had no place in disciplined Marxist-Leninist politics.

A comment in one of our issues expounded on this view: “At the outset, it is imperative to recognise that the ‘woman question’ cannot be treated as a ‘class question’, because women do not belong to a homogeneous class...” It went on to say that

Third World countries like India, where women form a part of a large oppressed class, delinking the women’s movement from the main mass movement (which is what some bourgeois feminists are trying to do) will only result in its being used by the ruling class to serve its own interests.

For “genuine equality”, it was laid down,

... women must rise in revolt against the system that oppresses them. Their mobilisation should start from their own human condition – as exploited women and labour. This mobilisation and struggle should not stop at their specific female oppression, as it is inextricably interwoven into the oppression of the toiling classes – the majority of mankind.

Meanwhile the Emergency continued and with it the promulgation of draconian laws and midnight knocks that often preceded the arbitrary incarceration of over one lakh people, and the brutal bulldozing of squatter settlements in a bid to 'beautify' urban environs. Every devious move crafted in Lutyens' Delhi only served to strengthen our resolve to resist the "exploitative, heartless ruling class". While we worked under editors who extolled Mrs Gandhi's political courage in the cold light of day, we lampooned their servility in our secretly circulated columns. In a comment on the 75th plenary session of the Indian National Congress, we wrote:

The recent session at Chandigarh ... tabooed all dissent and debate and concentrated on hilarity. Thus, on the opening day, the Madame wore a salwar-kameez (sending a senile Sikh editor of a Bombay weekly into such ecstasies!) and began her speech on the concluding day with New Year greetings in Punjabi, and in between the meetings, attempted to eat with the delegates. This last act is what is known as a 'democratic gesture' in our country.

Our group understood very well that in many ways its relevance hinged critically on Mrs Gandhi's dictatorship. The moment the Prime Minister indicated that she was willing to dismantle her 21-month experiment in autocracy, she complicated life for the leaders of our tiny outfit. Their fear of irrelevance was prescient. The moment the shadow of the Emergency was lifted, the virtues of sectoral politics practised 'underground' became far less compelling. *Spartacus* played down the significance of Verdict 1977 which ended the Indira Gandhi dictatorship: "... this Verdict was not wrested from the Congress regime ... it was the result of a gigantic miscalculation on the part of Indira Gandhi and her Gestapo, the RAW". That may well have been the case, but there could also be no denying the decisive change in the country's political landscape. Once the suspension of civil rights was lifted, the

popular sense of freedom was palpable and the tumult of a million voices filled the void. Every right needed to be defended anew, every institution subjected to fresh scrutiny. The old acceptance of official impunity and the earlier apathy towards the assumptions of those in power made way for a new questioning.

Like many others in that period of ferment, I found myself rising like fresh bread. The comfort of revolutionary solidarity, the assurance inherent in following a political line predetermined as the correct one, the secret pleasure in being attached to a group that had no identity overground, the hortatory exhortations, the expositions on political theory and practice, all of this now appeared far less alluring. There was a great deal, of course, that I had gained from my association with the group: the exposure to a wholly new world of left-wing ideas, the sense of being a human being with a social conscience, the ability to unreservedly critique the ways of the powerful, the courage to defy inherited assumptions and attitudes, and even the sheer delight of reading the luminescent poetry of a Pablo Neruda or the irony-laden lines of a Bertolt Brecht – nothing of this would have become a part of my life if I had not spent those two years and a bit residing in a version of the underground.

On the debit side, though, was the ideological fundamentalism, the hierarchies of the leader and the led, the enforced and compulsive secrecy, the explanations that needed to be made for every stance deemed "un-Marxist", every friendship considered "unsuitable" or even for reading a book dismissed as "bourgeois". Loyalty to an abstract idea of revolutionary change and to friends within the group made it difficult to leave. But as the months went by, I found myself increasingly chafing at being told what to think and in having to defend what I thought. I was now in my mid-twenties and found myself inexorably drawn into emotional involvements

and personal friendships with people outside our small circle. The group responded much like the patriarchal Indian family would have. Deviations such as these were strictly frowned upon and were the subject of lengthy dissertations about "revolutionary relationships", such as that between Lenin and Krupskaya.

Something in me found these attempts at control initially mortifying and eventually suffocating. If it was rebellion against familial ties, middle class conditioning and autocratic politics that had brought me into the group in the first place, it was rebellion again – this time against a personalised male autocracy and a sectarian mindset – that wanted me out of it. A chance journalistic encounter with Germaine Greer, then an energetic forty-year-old on a short visit to Bombay, and still some way from the eccentric she was later to evolve into, was invigorating. She talked about how she saw the liberation of women as part of a humanitarian movement.

It is not so much becoming liberated *from* but being liberated *into*; it is becoming self where she was the other; it is becoming whole where she was incomplete; it is knowing her own secret satisfaction and stating it where she had shared another's.

Greer seemed to speak for me. While there was no going back to the person I once was, there could also be no constraining the person I was becoming.

Women's groups were among the more articulate social forces in post-Emergency India. Many ordinary women were becoming part of what came to be known as the second phase of the Indian women's movement in the late Seventies and early Eighties. The central concern was sexual violence, perhaps because it shone the torch on the unequal relations between the genders for the first time in the country's history. Even an 'establishment' organisation like the Mahila Dakshata Samiti began to interrogate the innocuous 'stove deaths' of

newly married women and concluded that many of them were actually dowry murders. When the Supreme Court overturned the verdict of the Delhi High Court and exonerated two policemen accused of having raped Mathura, a young tribal girl, in a police station, there was a national outcry. An Open Letter to the Supreme Court written by four law professors from Delhi University directly confronted the judge who delivered that verdict:

Your Lordship, does the Indian Supreme Court expect a young girl, 14-16 years old, when trapped by two policemen inside the police station, to successfully raise an alarm for help? The Court gives no consideration whatsoever to the socio-economic status, the lack of knowledge of legal rights, the age of the victim, lack of access to legal services, and the fear ... which haunts the poor and the exploited in Indian police stations...

If there could be no avoiding class, there could also be no avoiding patriarchy. It was there at every level of society, and it was also obvious that an issue like violence against women could be a deeply political and class issue. It was logical then for a woman like me, with left leanings, in search of socially relevant activity, to gravitate to the cluster of amorphous organisations which saw themselves constituting the "autonomous" – as opposed to the "party-led" – women's movement. They presented a total contrast to the group I had just drifted from: while one was disciplined, centralised, singular in ideology, secretive, hierarchical, male-centric and represented the radical Left, the other was chaotic, patently open in its functioning, leaderless to the point of being rudderless, largely female in composition, and embraced a plethora of political cultures, ideologies and strategies, all of which were broadly left of the spectrum. Coping with the chaos, the lack of planning – random meetings held at random places or spontaneous decisions to stage impromptu demos –

was daunting, especially in a city like Bombay, strung out like a line of washed linen. But the energy on display went straight to the head and the spontaneous reaching out to each other, across a hugely wide spectrum of backgrounds and ages, touched the heart.

The questions and quests that had emerged in the late Seventies lingered on with the arrival of the Eighties. The new decade – which many today recognise as the most significant one for the Indian women's movement – began on an emphatic note. The Forum Against Rape, the idea of which was engendered on the fighting streets of the city and dispersed through pamphlets distributed in offices, trains and stations, was formally inaugurated in February 1980 at the Cama Hall, in the stone heart of South Bombay. I remember the excitement of that moment. Ahilya Rangnekar, the grand old communist woman leader, spoke on the occasion, as did Indira Jaising, the prominent feminist lawyer. Vijay Tendulkar, one of Marathi literature's finest and socially aware minds, who consistently disturbed the peace of the suburban middle classes through his provocative, non-conformist theatre, hailed the brave women who were ushering in a revolution. *The Times of India*, which normally looked askance at any activity that threatened the established order, took note of the event and reported on a "mass signature campaign that has been organised for a reopening of the Mathura case and a review of the loophole-ridden rape law which results in an astoundingly low rate of convictions".

You could make what you wanted of the Forum. Marxist-Leninist groups dismissed it as an exercise in revisionism, many voiced apprehensions that it was "blindly anti-men", but there were as many, including men, who saw it as a social force that had the potential to transform society. Women activists perceived it in more personalised terms – as a platform, a network, a shelter of their own, something that

everybody could claim but nobody could possess. While it was located in Bombay, it seemed to stand for Everywoman, whether she was battling the timber mafia in the high Himalayas, campaigning against dodgy contraceptive injectables in Delhi, fighting for dues as a fish vendor in coastal Kerala, or protesting court verdicts in Hyderabad.

As awareness of the multi-dimensional aspects of violence grew it was clear that addressing them would demand multi-dimensional agendas and actions, whether they were struggles to change existing laws or to raise awareness on safety for women in public spaces. In keeping with that realisation, the Forum Against Rape was rechristened the Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW). It was a period of activism all over the world. In San Francisco and New York, women were marching and raising slogans like "Let's Take Back the Night". In Bombay we felt we needed to take back not just the night but the day, and not just the public space but the private space as well.

The first concern was easy to understand. Every woman in a city of over half a lakh women commuters had experienced the insecurity of walking the streets, and murderous attacks on suburban women commuters were not unusual. As part of the Forum we conducted a two-week long campaign demanding that men be evicted from women's compartments and that they be rendered safe for the women travelling in them at all times. Every night, for those fourteen days after the evening rush had subsided, we plastered train compartments with posters – using improvised glue made of flour and brewed over kitchen fires – exhorting women to demand a safer public environment for themselves.

The insecurity of the private space was far more difficult to comprehend. That homes could be sites of violence seemed like perversely overstating the case, even for someone like me schooled by Engels himself and trained to critique the bourgeois

family. Marriage and a husband had arrived in my life and there was the euphoria of being in a stable relationship. But the stories of individual women presented a complex reality.

I can still visualise a young, pale-faced woman in a sari with two little girls by her side participating in a street-corner meeting. Her arms bore the imprints of her husband's compulsive physical attacks, and she emerged as a living testament to the untold, unacknowledged terrors of spousal abuse that marked many respectable marriages in the country. Flavia Agnes's decision not to go back to her husband's home and her courage, as a woman with no college education, to imagine a new life for herself and her two daughters against the greatest odds, in an expensive, self-absorbed city like Bombay, conjured up endless possibilities for self-empowerment. This was both rousing and humbling. The first step in Flavia's plan to escape from her past was to retrieve her personal effects, including a fridge and a Godrej almirah – the ultimate symbols of a middle class, married life – from her matrimonial home. Flavia recalled that particular episode in a small book she later wrote on her life:

There was great excitement! One of my friends offered to store the things as I did not have a permanent place. Ten women volunteered to come with me to the house ... Finally ... by 2 p.m. we had managed to collect and pack everything and we left the place...It was a major victory for me.

As indeed it was for the rest of us – an early experiment in defending a woman's matrimonial property rights.

Today, with list servers and the short messaging system, organising an impromptu demo to highlight a social concern is relatively easily done. Twenty-five years ago, it demanded meticulous preparation, right down to drawing and distributing detailed maps of the exact location of the action. When Rita Lala, a newly married woman in the Bombay suburb of Mulund,

died in a blaze of flames in her husband's home in August 1981, it led to a desultory First Information Report followed by an apathetic medical statement. The doctors of the local municipal hospital just shrugged their shoulders and said: "94 per cent burns, body smelling of kerosene. Deceased came to hospital in a state of drowsiness. Could be either suicide or homicide." The sluggish response of the authorities to the case provoked some thirty of us to descend outside the husband's flat in a middle class housing society and create a ruckus through concerted sloganeering, guaranteed to open every window in that building.

What these shock tactics lacked in deliberation and broader strategy was made up for in spontaneity and energy. We doggedly held on to our right to name and shame the villains – whether they were husbands, mothers-in-law or police constables – given the widespread nature of gender disempowerment. But public reaction to such action was often hostile. There were accusations that women's groups were being used as pressure points to circumvent the due process of law. We were forced to understand that without public opinion on our side, we would remain ineffectual, that our actions would only be symbolic at best. We needed to reach out and touch the minds of ordinary people, bring in creative talent and explore new ways of capturing the public imagination.

As journalists and practitioners of language and communication, there was the additional demand to search for new ways of telling, to discard lazy stereotypes and attempt new definitions. We also had to confront the arbitrary editorial distinctions made between 'soft' and 'hard' stories, with stories of social or gender concern being pushed into the nooks and corners of the publication. The general content of ordinary newspaper reports and magazine features was rife with innumerable put-downs: women were "birds" or "chicks"

who “nagged” rather than “explained”, who “gossiped” rather than “conversed”, whose concerns were invariably “trivial” rather than “relevant”. Humankind was represented by “mankind” and the ubiquitous pronoun “he” dominated all narratives. We sought to remove the sexism that ordinary words seemed to carry in their genes. For us it was no longer “eve-teasing” but “sexual harassment”; rape was not about defending a woman’s “honour” but her right to exist without fear; these were no longer “stove deaths” but “dowry murders”; women who came under attack were no longer “victims” but “survivors”.

Years later, as the interrogation of language continued apace and the various biases of usage, whether they were anti-race, anti-caste, anti-gay, age-ist or fat-tist, came under the scanner, critics dismissed them as exercises in political correctness. But teasing out sexist terms for us was immensely important because their assumptions and implications were linked to everyday realities. The search for space to place feminist ideas was also a huge challenge, especially within a tightly controlled and utterly status quoist newspaper like *The Times of India*. A conventional women’s magazine, which went by a name that made us all wince, *Eve’s Weekly*, that I joined in the early ’80s, proved to be an unlikely trojan horse. We smuggled in articles on gender rights and activism within its formulaic grid of food, romance, agony aunt columns, child-rearing tips, fashion spreads and knitting patterns. It worked only up to a point. Once we decided to replace the usual “cover girl” – invariably painted up by make-up wizard, Mickey Contractor – with a photograph of British women protesting at Greenham Common. Within a week there were piles of unsold copies, or “returns”, at the office doorstep with the advertising and circulation department folk wailing, “How do you expect us to sell such content to our clients?”

Street theatre was an early way of attacking the culture of silence. The Stree Mukti Sanghatana tried to get city crowds to laugh with them through their Marathi street play titled, *Mulgi Jhali Ho*, which portrayed grooms as consumer goods bearing price tags around their necks. Then there was a strikingly unusual dance drama, *Jagruti*, created by two young women who had no formal training in either dance or theatre. It portrayed a woman’s story through various dance forms and songs in different languages. Rehearsing for the dance-drama, staged on Women’s Day in a downtown theatre one year, meant jumping on to crowded trains and buses after office, during rush hour, to venues all over the city, and energetically dancing late into the night until we were ready to drop with fatigue. But nobody seemed to mind. It was as if Subramanya Bharathi, the renowned Tamil poet, had written the lines which ended *Jagruti* expressly for us: “The ghosts that possessed our souls have fled/And we are free.”

None of these cultural events was intellectually deep or aesthetically profound but they were exercises in what Madras-based Chandralekha, who had become nationally renowned as a feminist choreographer and was conducting cultural workshops for women in those years, termed as “discovering the difference between the expanding of energy and the generation of energy”. As she put it once in a conversation with me, “The preoccupation seems to be on collecting data, processing information. Okay, I grant all this is important but after that, what? We need to rise above propaganda and make our forms of expression work for us as women.”

Looking back, the decade of the Eighties can be seen as the incubator of almost every significant gender issue that would become a national concern a decade or two later. These were the years that saw major legal reform, whether it was about protection for rape survivors or acknowledging “abetment to suicide” as a crime that punctured forever the

myth of the inviolable and sacred Indian family. The agenda which began with violence kept expanding like an accordion as time went by. Those years saw the first major public articulations on issues like sex selective abortions, property and housing rights for women, underpaid feminised labour in export zones, contraception that destroyed women's bodies. There was a recognition of the value of women's work; of the gendered impact of environmental degradation; caste hatred and communal atrocities; and an acknowledgement of the price women paid for religious fundamentalism – whether manifested in a glorified sati at Deorala or in a Muslim woman's long, lonely battle for maintenance. It was the decade that saw the greatest generation and dissemination of books and research on gender, fostered by women's studies units and feminist publishing houses. *Manushi*, India's first national feminist magazine, which made its appearance in January 1979 with Ira Roy's dark, Kollwitzian illustrations, became an important resource. Many activists documented the personal histories of ordinary women, others scripted the history of the movement itself. While the recovery of subjective experience and the generation of gendered analyses could not have happened without the movement, they in turn contributed to its ideological maturing.

As the Eighties unwound, there was an intriguing development: the political elite evinced a new and growing interest in questions of gender. The Government of India set up a Department for Women and Child Development in 1985. In 1988 came the National Perspective Plan for Women, which mooted an idea that had first emerged in the Report *Towards Equality*, some fourteen years earlier: reservations for women in political posts. The Plan recommended that 30 per cent of seats in local bodies be reserved for women, and that temporary reservations (up to the year 2000) of 30 per cent be instituted in state legislatures and in parliament. As

preparations for the 1989 general election began, the Rajiv Gandhi government put forward the Indira Mahila Yojana, which the Prime Minister dedicated to "solving the problems of women holistically".

If the first half of the Eighties had seen awakening and the growth of the movement, the second half of the decade was now moving slowly towards its mainstreaming. This development was met by a deep ambivalence. It was great to know that feminist activity was no longer seen as the preoccupation of home-breakers belonging to the loony fringe, but as a crucial component for the country's progress and development. It was heartening that the label of gender activism ensured that funding poured in, and resource centres, protection homes and legal aid units were being set up all over the country. Many activists came to be nationally and internationally recognised and applauded, and that too was cause for celebration. In many ways we had struggled for this: to make visible a concern that had never earlier figured in the public space.

But somewhere there also lurked a suspicion that for the ruling elite and those they patronised, this sudden empathy was just a charade, an exercise in image-building. There was also the fear of co-option, the robbing of autonomy and an ultimate silencing. Clearly the passion, vibrancy and inherently democratic functioning of the old order were yielding place to carefully constructed norms and rules, structures and outcomes. Intra-movement divisions now began to manifest themselves. Some of these rifts were ideologically driven, others were caused by battles for fiefdoms and personality clashes. Spaces that were once so easily and effortlessly shared, now acquired proprietary overtones. There could also be no denying the Wordsworthian moment: *Whither is fled the visionary gleam?/Where is it now, the glory and the dream?*

One activist, speaking to me as the Forum got ready to

celebrate its decade of existence at the very Cama Hall that saw its launch ten years earlier, put it this way: "We are now faced with contradictions. We cannot even function any more as a united force for change. While we propagate the idea that all women can survive through struggle, we ourselves are dependent on support structures that are outside the movement. What are the viable role models we are providing to women who don't have access to such support structures?"

The Nineties were upon us and the time was ripe, it seemed, for another generation of women to take over the movement and forge it in their own image. Yet for those of us who were touched by the passions and battles of the late Seventies and Eighties – the years of awakening – life would never be the same again.



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Living History: A Time in a Life

UMA CHAKRAVARTI

LOOKING back on one's life – and at this point one can only look back, born in 1941, so nearing seven decades soon – the end of innocence for me came with the 1975 Emergency. It was the first really cathartic moment of my life, because who could have believed that there would be a civil emergency; that thousands would be arrested and incarcerated without trial; that mass arrest warrants in a standardised format were issued by magistrates who signed on the dotted line; that arrests were made because X or Y was 'inciting' an audience at the local taxi stand; that censorship would be imposed upon the media for the first time in independent India... There was fear, palpable, rumours flying everywhere, the University of Delhi targeted particularly with about two hundred teachers picked up, students too, for putting up posters that showed Indira Gandhi herself behind bars with the slogan *Tanashahon ka antim sthan* (the last post of a dictator). Classrooms were considered unsafe because we were supposedly under surveillance by an intelligence system, and so on.

A terrible feeling of depression set in. I had been involved in university elections, canvassing support for particular candidates supposed to be left and democratic. Obviously, I expected that the elected candidate would help secure the release of arrested teachers; I mentioned it to him, but met

with no real action on his part. The next time I saw him he crossed the road pretending not to see me, and over the years simply faded away from democratic politics of any kind. Others, like my colleague, the socialist Roma Mitra, suffered: she had participated in the Quit India movement as a student, then joined Miranda House in 1949, where I too taught history from 1966 onwards, and became a mentor of sorts. She had contested the 1952 Lok Sabha elections and lost, but left behind a precious legacy: that women's colleges were not going to be excluded from political engagement. By the time of the Emergency, she was a committed Lohiaite socialist who circulated anti-Emergency literature and was forced to go underground because the police were after her. No one knew where she was during those months, not even to be able to inform her of her beloved sister's death, an unmourned event that she never recovered from after the Emergency was lifted and she resurfaced.

In 1975, those of us who were part of the middle classes saw the repressive face of the state for the first time; others, who had been active in peasant movements, the Naxalite movement, left, democratic and other people's movements, had seen it much earlier – as early as the late Sixties – but this scale of arrests and mass repression was new for the capital city of Delhi. Children learnt to recognise the difference between a policeman and a postman if someone turned up at the door with a 'money order' hoping to ferret out some activist or other – their crew cuts and brown Keds gave them away. They learnt, too, that citizens did not have recourse to civil rights, including the right to life; when asked to enumerate two obstructions to good citizenship by a civics teacher (who was hoping to hear an answer about dumping garbage outside the house), one child, who had seen the police storm the house at night, wrote: "The infringement of one citizen's rights by another and the infringement of a citizen's rights by

the state!" It was a time when people disappeared inside jails and languished there with no one except close friends knowing they were there. This happened with Snehalata Reddy, who acted in the first new wave Kannada film, *Samskara*. Her prison diaries are a poignant account of her days in jail – days spent trying to figure out why she was there, what she was being held for. She died soon after she was let out on parole, still engulfed by the trauma of those days.

Others, like Primila Lewis and Srilatha Swaminadhan, went to jail for their work in organising bonded labourers around Delhi; ironically, the twenty-point programme of Mrs. Gandhi included the 'freeing' of bonded labour! It was a time when encounter killings took place in Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, their terrifying power captured so movingly in the film, *Piravi*. These led to the appointment of the Tarkunde Commission of Inquiry when the Emergency was lifted, but during the nineteen months it was in force, it felt as if it would never go away. The courts gave no relief, habeas corpus was suspended and, when officials and magistrates and judges were asked to bend, they were willing to crawl for the crumbs the state threw in their direction. All of this and more has been wonderfully portrayed in that marvellous documentary, *The Advocate*, by Deepa Dhanraj on the amazing civil rights lawyer, K.G. Kannabiran. It was only natural that, when the Emergency was lifted, the issue uppermost on every democratic person's agenda was the need for a strong civil liberties and democratic rights movement in the country. And so it was that I was a democratic rights 'activist' of sorts before I became a feminist, forever afterwards trying to balance the twin concerns that often seemed to flow in separate streams. And before that, I was simply a history teacher with an amazing bunch of students, a maverick teaching community and a moment in time in which the age of innocence ended.

I grew up in a very middle class home, very boisterous

with its seven children, all of whom were irreverent and high-spirited, trying hard to hold their own against each other, but kept in place by the very modest circumstances of the family, balancing its budget with the commitment to give all the children, girls as much as boys, a good education. Many decades later, I am grateful that my father's guilt at having a widowed sister at the mercy of uncaring brothers translated into an unflinching commitment to ensuring the economic independence of his daughters. And so we were sent to good, secular, English medium, co-ed schools, where everyone else was better off than we were, but we found a way to deal with that too, in the way children sometimes do.

I was put into school at age five, and a year later was witness to the end of colonial rule – and also the trauma of Partition. I have no strong memories of childhood, but I clearly recall an occasion in 1946, when riots broke out in Old Delhi and a group of rioters told us children to return home since there was going to be trouble in our area. By August 1947, there was mayhem in the streets. My brother and sister literally 'witnessed' a killing as a group of three Muslim men ran towards a police station for shelter. Two got there, the third didn't; the terror of that killing changed my sister from a devil-may-care child to a fearful, always-looking-over-her-shoulder kind of girl who never recovered from the shock of that murder. A routine illness with high fever had me crying, "Why are the Hindus and Muslims killing each other?" in my delirium. We locked ourselves inside the house in the curfew-bound city as it burnt, our days interspersed with stories of trains full of bodies going across the Punjab, both ways, leaving behind a terrifying memory that resurfaced in the 1984 anti-Sikh carnage in Delhi. When school reopened, the new girl in my class, who became my 'best' friend, had walked across the 'border' with her family, so one got a first-hand account of the enormous human misery that accompanied

the birth of the nation-state. One unhinged and broken-down maths teacher who had come from Lahore strayed into our school, borderless and gateless as it was, intermittently solving maths problems in the air, muttering to himself, weeping at the same time, exclaiming, "Ma, main kadi na Pindi javan" (Mother, I'll never go to [Rawal]pindi).

That sense of living through tumultuous times was dramatically heightened with the assassination of Gandhiji. At six-and-a-half years, my only memories are of every single person in our neighbourhood instinctively rushing out of the house and standing in shocked little clusters as they tried to register the meaning of the news; and next morning everyone going to Kingsway – renamed Rajpath later to suit the new republic of India – to 'see' the funeral procession of the man whom all his political compatriots had, in a sense, betrayed. Then, when he was broken in spirit but still fighting to hold on to a vision of the subcontinent with easily crossable borders and rights for the minorities in the new nation-states, gunned down by a Hindu fanatic. With people in the hundreds milling about the India Gate lawns, I could see nothing till my father placed me on top of a parked car so that I, too, could partake of the collective grief of the people.

Perhaps it was all this that led me inexorably towards history, the only subject I had ever wanted to 'study' in my life. My school was in tents and shifted from being housed in a church building to tents on North Avenue, aptly called the Naveen Bharat High School, located finally on Mathura Road as the Delhi Public School. The grounds around us were dotted with derelict monuments, graves and mausoleums, not far from the beautiful Humayun's Tomb. One of these fairly well-preserved tombs on our premises became the school dispensary! History was so all around me, so much a part of the bicycle rides to school and back, so much a part of our everyday wanderings that it became the centre of my being,

the anchor of my childhood, propelling me to study it later in life even though it seemed so difficult to pursue. It was not offered as a main subject in my undergrad course in Bangalore (where we had moved after my father retired), and not taught at all at the MA level as all humanities and social science subjects were allocated to Mysore in the crazy distribution of departments between Bangalore and Mysore in the early 1960s. Mysore was just ninety miles away, but too expensive to go to as a residential student, so I settled down to a law course in Bangalore and a simultaneous MA in history at Banaras Hindu University as a 'private' student, studying from a syllabus sent to me by bookshops in Banaras, plus those borrowed from sundry libraries in Bangalore, including that of the famous Mythic Society. The entire family was pressed into service to help me with my double load – older members, including my parents, making notes; younger ones accompanying me on our bikes to the libraries in search of books.

I got through somehow, though the course was as dull as hell, with no social history and, of course, no gender; yet it was all worth it when I got a job in Delhi as a teacher at Miranda House. This was where I had desperately wanted to do the history honours course, but had not been able to. Miranda House, where I taught history for some forty-odd years, was the anchor of my adult life: it was here that I really learnt my history, teaching it to others, sometimes only barely ahead of them in the early years; and it was here that I learnt my politics from irreverent and unruly teachers famous for throwing out principals, and challenged in turn by irrepressible students. In the late Sixties and early Seventies, we had our own local version of the troubled Sixties phenomenon in many parts of the world. It began with Lohiaite socialists on campus demanding Hindi as a medium of instruction at Delhi University; continuing with students at MH and on campus gheraoing the vice chancellor (VC) and principal for refusing

to allow institutional structures to be democratised; culminating with many students going off to the villages as part of the Naxalite call to student activists. I was reminded of its tumultuous energy many years later when I came across a piece of paper signed by the college student president – a radical young woman at that time and now a senior foreign service officer – a show cause notice to the principal asking why action should not be taken against her for some dictatorial action or the other!

I learnt from my students as they upturned 'norms', abolished hallowed traditions like the Miss Miranda contest in an early feminist initiative, and put in its place other cultures, cultures of resistance. Between Anuradha Kapoor and Maya Rao, Gorky's *Mother* was translated and performed in Hindi by the 'English' Dramatic Society, a move that was bitterly opposed by the staff advisers of the Society – but who cared?

When the Bangladesh crisis hit us in 1971, students led me off to demonstrations and blood donation camps; to anti-price rise protests by left-democratic women's organisations; and, along with other teachers, to the huge democratic upsurge against the corruption and authoritarianism of the state in the years just before the imposition of the Emergency. For us in the university, the Emergency was an especially bitter pill: it killed dissent, stopped the move towards democratisation, and put a bunch of toadies into positions of power – they managed meetings and decided who could come onto the campus to speak and, of course, who could not. It was the amazing energy of the teachers and students of my college that ensured that Miranda House did not let the 'baddies' of the Emergency come to the college, whatever the ruse.

When the Emergency was lifted, almost miraculously, it was like the lifting of an oppressive weight, but the real headiness came when the Opposition swept the polls. Then followed the sobering up. All the pre-Emergency civil rights

groups, and some new ones too, came together in Delhi where we met activists who had been put into jail, like C.V. Subba Rao from Andhra (now sadly gone in an early death), and others from Bombay and Punjab. Then there were those who were located in Delhi – Sumanta Banerjee, Sudesh Vaid and Gobinda Mukhoty, the last two also sadly gone, as well as older figures like Kuldip Nayar and Justice Tarkunde. Under the auspices of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) and the People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR), a group of us formed the Jail Reform Committee to look into jail conditions and suggest the introduction of a category called 'political prisoners'. This was never conceded by the state, then or now, no matter what its political colour. All I can remember from those visits to jails was the utter inhumanity of conditions there for inmates, most of them undertrials who would never actually be convicted, meeting their relatives from behind a cage-like wall comprised of a steel gridded barrier, hands reaching out desperately to touch each other. It's a sight I have never forgotten.

Miranda House became the centre of my democratic and political work: we showed films like Anand Patwardhan's *Prisoners of Conscience*, about the Emergency; helped host art exhibitions about excesses in the north-east; battled and stalled the takeover of the education syllabi by the Jan Sangh minister then heading the ministry; protested against renegade ministers like George Fernandes for acts of betrayal, the precise nature of which I can't quite remember. His slide from being a fire-brand socialist to becoming a power-seeking politician had begun.

The false promise of a democratic possibility post the Emergency was soon broken with the non-Congress Opposition failing to complete its term. It was clear that Mrs. G. would be back in power and everyone expected more authoritarian acts on her return: I was plagued by nightmares in which

planes crashed, then smashed into the house we lived in and, finally, led to forest fires from which we couldn't escape. I realised then that I was dealing with an anxiety about not being able to ward off the tyrannies of the world around us. Once I understood that, the nightmares ceased and I tried to reconcile myself to the inevitable.

Back in power, Mrs. G. tried a different way of dealing with the state's crisis of legitimacy, so evident from the late Sixties with the Naxalites throwing up the unresolved land question, and other movements interrogating the mode of governance. Since a 'secular' authoritarian response to this crisis had failed, the ruling party sought to stoke another fire: Mrs. G. set fundamentalist Bhindranwale up against the dissenting Akalis in much the same way as America set bin Laden up against the Russian-backed government in Afghanistan, with disastrous results in both cases. Once the genie was let out of the bottle, it was difficult to put back: Operation Bluestar in 1984 and the anti-Sikh carnage a few months later were almost inevitable, with tragic consequences for the country, particularly for its 'secular'-democratic fabric, with the state directly involved in the violence that was unleashed. It was a terrible moment in our history, especially for those of us in north India.

When Mrs. G. was assassinated, I was in college overseeing a rehearsal of one of those silly little English drawing-room comedies that dramatic societies of colleges put on for the 'festival' circuit of universities in India. Rumours started flying, but there was no confirmation till late that afternoon, so I remember going to a scheduled PUDR public meeting in the university and then going home to our rented flat owned by a Sikh school headmaster, a left sympathiser, who was critical of Mrs. G.'s policies, as we all were. When we got home, he said sadly, and with bewilderment, "Yeh kya hua? What is this that's happened? What sense does it make?"

By next morning, mobs were prowling the streets, attacking Sikhs; when Uncleji, our landlord, was persuaded to come into our flat, he brought his licensed revolver with him, "for self protection", he said, as he took refuge from the mobs. By late afternoon, he was taken away to safety, but in the street we had to guard the immediate neighbourhood from attack. Next morning, there was news of attacks on Sikhs on trains, and somehow this one news item paralysed me in a way that all the other news hadn't. I collapsed for a few hours, with the memory of all those trains full of bodies at Partition flooding back. Of course, this was a widely shared sentiment in 1984 among Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike.

When curfew was lifted, our visits to the relief camps began with other PUDR activists, and at the camps we realised that the carnage had been engineered – the mobs had been allowed to roam the streets and the killings were meant to serve a purpose. Within seven days, PUDR and PUCL produced a joint report, *Who Are The Guilty?*, a landmark in some senses as it put the killings in perspective: this was not a riot between Hindus and Sikhs, but a party-sponsored killing spree. For years after, it became the all-consuming activity of the democratic rights constituency as we tried to keep track of the various commissions of enquiry, court cases, reports in the press and the twists and turns of the criminal-justice system.

1984 was an all-consuming anxiety for feminists too. The autonomous women's movement had established itself in Delhi from the late Seventies, although it had already 'appeared' in some form in parts of western India and Hyderabad earlier. In my immediate vicinity, discussions on the woman question were taking place in Ruth Vanita's hostel room at MH, as Communist Party meetings had in the late Forties in Kanti Sastri's room. And then came the Rameeza Bi case – the rape of a woman in police custody in Hyderabad

in the late Seventies, taken up by civil rights groups there and reflecting the wide arc of interrelated movements at the time. By the time the offensive Supreme Court judgement on the rape of Mathura, a young adivasi woman, in a police thana was announced, time was ripe for an outraged reaction by democratic-feminist forces, triggering off a nation-wide campaign against the patriarchal, upper casteist, prejudiced, morally hidebound framework of the highest court in the land. This was quickly followed by the anti-dowry murders campaign in Delhi, shaking the middle class complacency of most of us in the city and in the university. There was an eruption of anger and anguish at the horror of the murders inside the supposedly 'sacred' space of the home.

Two moves were initiated as part of an attempt to mobilise opinion on dowry murders. One was PUDR's fact-finding report, *Inside the Family*, written by a team of women and men who analysed the phenomenon of dowry murders;¹ the other was to think of a way to disseminate what was actually happening 'within' the family more widely. After some months of intense campaigning, several women's groups felt the need for a more direct method of communication with people; discussions gave rise to the idea of a street play, *Om Swaha*, based on the real lives of two women who had been killed by their in-laws in Delhi. *Om Swaha* was poignant and analytical and, after repeated re-workings of the ending, even hopeful of bringing

¹ Sudesh Vaid was the mainspring of this brilliant analysis with others in PUDR, especially C.V. Subba Rao. It was their first fact-finding report on a 'women's issue', an important move in the thinking of democratic groups, which did not come without a push from women like Sudesh. Indraprastha College was a base for the anti-dowry campaigns, as women's groups like Stree Sangharsh liaised with feminists on campus to participate in and add force to the campaigns. Many women in the emerging women's groups were teachers, journalists and theatre persons, so the campaigns had a great deal of doubling: several women did the necessary reading and writing on dowry murders, and everyone was required to be in the street play.

about some change in society. Using a technique now made famous by Augusto Boal, people from the audience were brought into the play to help find solutions to the trapped condition young wives found themselves in. It was performed in mohallas, colleges, parks and genteel residential areas, with a rotating team of 'actors' and 'actresses' enabling the 'show' to move rapidly to a new site, whether its designated actors were free to perform or not. High drama, crudity and humour were blended to hard-hit in-laws who, first made outrageous demands for goods and cash, then killed young wives; parents who shut the door on daughters returning home; and a 'society' that looked on passively as women were burnt to death. I recall even policemen with tears in their eyes contributing to the play when we came around for donations.

Although the university did not have a women's group as such, it had been drawn into the city-wide campaign against dowry murders through its teachers and students and, in turn, drew upon the support of groups in the city, particularly for its campaigns against sexual harassment, almost a permanent feature of life on campus. The city and, later, the university were forced to do something about the violence women faced on the streets, in buses and within the colleges of the campus. Women's colleges collaborated with each other when they took up the harassment of students, particularly in the University Specials which carried the bulk of students to the university and back. A typical response of the Delhi Transport Corporation was to introduce a few 'Ladies' Specials' – women-only buses – to combat what was euphemistically called 'eve-teasing', a term that had survived from a nineteenth century colonial law. Everything from the 'chic charts' put up in St. Stephens college – that evaluated women students on the basis of their appearance – to hooliganism in the name of Holi led to spirited campaigns; sexual harassment within classrooms and laboratories was also brought into the public

domain: the case of a science student whose harassment led to her suicide created a furore among the feminist/democratic sections of the campus who campaigned to bring the powerful professor of science to book, to be subjected to an enquiry and, possibly, punishment. We failed in our attempts to provide justice to the young student – there was no sexual harassment policy then – but we learnt from it and did better when the next case came along, even gheraoing the acting VC. The housing quarters were plastered with some pretty blunt posters that struck home. In the end, this ‘professor’, at least, was dismissed from service. In a fundamental sense, the University was a microcosm of the city in terms of addressing violence against women, leading ultimately to putting in place an anti-sexual harassment policy at the university in 2004.

The most powerful long term consequence of the women’s movement in universities across India was the birth of the women’s studies movement; the need to understand and analyse indigenous and home-grown patriarchy and its embeddedness in culture hit us like a thunderbolt. For me, it was the dowry murders that were the trigger. As I stood with a group of women, for the nth time, in a crowded mohalla in old Delhi, an anguished young woman turned to me and said, “You are a historian of ancient India. Tell us what there is in our culture that says a woman who is being tortured for dowry cannot leave her husband’s home and exit from an oppressive and life-threatening relationship?” A few months later, I wrote a paper on the Sita myth based on various versions of the *Ramayana*. Its last lines are suitably cynical: while Sita could ‘choose’ a dignified end to her life, she could not wrest for herself a life with dignity. The paper was part of a wider engagement with culture with friends across the country, but particularly from Indraprastha College who organised the first such seminar on campus. Three decades later, we have a fairly solid body of feminist writing on just about every aspect of

gender, even if we have not transformed the male-centredness of the syllabi; just as we have, as a movement, exposed the incredible amount of violence against women in India without being able to end it.

In the 1980s, a number of women’s groups had been campaigning on a range of issues when 1984 happened, and different strands of feminist engagement in Delhi fell into some kind of complicated relationship with other groups as the consequences of anti-Sikh violence unfolded. Dealing with the trauma of women and children was central to the work of many women’s groups in the city, and to women in the university as well, forced by circumstances to throw themselves into a kind of activism they had never imagined for themselves. Students joined relief groups in large numbers; women’s groups contended with attempts to take over the compensation money of widows through coercive marriages with brothers-in-law; and the historian in me impelled me to try to document what had happened so that we would have a record that would counter the ‘official’ version of the carnage that the state was bound to put in place. My student, Nandita Haksar, who came into my history subsidiary class at sixteen and who has stayed in my life since then (first going on to do an MA in history and then studying law to fight injustice), responded to my desperate plea to *document* the present by just getting on with what needed to be done: take a tape recorder and go into the colonies where the Sikhs from the worst killings had been relocated, and put their stories of those ‘three days in the life of the nation’ on tape. 1984 was the history and politics of our times – how could I confine myself to writing only about the age of the Buddha, my historical project up until then? And so it was that the book on the 1984 pogrom was published before I completed my academic journey as a history ‘scholar’ with the publication of my PhD thesis. There was the story of Phanda Singh, sounding

almost like a dastaango, travelling through many lands and many moments, starting from Sindh in Pakistan to Bombay (because Nehru exhorted them to come to India); and from there to Rajasthan where there was no work but where they learnt to weave charpoys; then to Delhi and to many places within Delhi till he and his fellow journeymen got pattas from Mrs. Gandhi in the resettlement colonies during the Emergency; finding a 'resting' place, finally, only to be cruelly targeted – losing his three sons to a madness that was supposed to assuage the spirit of Mrs. G. Even after all that, all Phanda Singh wanted was for the rule of law to prevail, for the courts to give him justice, and not some act of retaliatory violence that might appease the anger of some angry young men for the moment.

1984 was another kind of watershed, just as the Emergency had been. Over the years, I have had my own benchmarks for the bad moments of our lives: the Emergency; 1984; the anti-Mandal agitation of 1989, as we watched the vituperative reaction of the middle classes – all upper caste of course – and the media's reaction; the mobilisation by Hindutvavadis that began a series of riots against Muslims in Bhagalpur in 1989-90; the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the riots that followed it in Mumbai and Surat; the ride to power of the BJP on the bodies of people; the blasting of the nuclear bomb in 1998 by our erstwhile 'socialist' defence minister; and the terrorism of Narendra Modi in 2002 in Gujarat. Each time one of these 'events' took place, I would tell myself, "It can't get worse," but each time it has; what is alarming is that each successive time one has lost some section of people one had, at some point, worked with until then. For me, this has been the real downside of a bad enough journey; Mandal was perhaps the worst because it fractured the fragile solidarities within the women's movement itself, as urban feminists in north India – thank God, only in north India – tried to

understand the fact of caste not from other feminists, but from sociologists, each of them invested in the caste system themselves.

The darkness and despair have been countered only by the collective work we have done at different moments in our lives. In my case, the journey began with PUDR and its fact-finding into various acts of repression by the state or by some section of society upon another. The earliest of these was the crushing of a people's mine in Saharjori in 1983 in undivided Bihar (now Jharkhand), where many thousands of workers found themselves left out of the benefits of the nationalisation of coal mines, as statutorily recognised workers. They ran their own mine for many years, piling up the coal and asking for the mine to be taken over. After a while, with no wages coming in, they began to pay themselves with a share of the coal that they had piled up; this continued till the bulldozers of the state came in one day to crush the piles of coal mined by them. It was a chastening fact-finding, full of tension as we tried to escape the 'eye' of the coal mafia and meet our secret contacts in pre-arranged places. The unexpected discovery of the truck driver meant to be our escort but looking like the mafia himself, then turning out to be an old student of Khalsa College (oh, the joys of meeting students, especially old students, in unexpected corners of the world!) was both funny and a relief. It was on this trip that politically active groups in Bihar waylaid us to do a second fact-finding as there had been police repression against poor people struggling over government-owned land. Harnandan, an older dalit agricultural labourer, took a shine to me and insisted that he would commandeer a cycle rickshaw so that I didn't have to walk four kilometres back to the station. Having got me to sit in it, he drove me down a slope since he didn't really know how to drive a rickshaw!

As we entered the village, there was the shock of seeing

an eighteen-year-old boy's body laid out on the ground; I thought he had been killed in the police repression, but he had died simply because his family did not have the few hundred rupees required for his treatment. It was my first encounter with health/sickness and the democratic rights of people who had a right to life in the Constitution – but not in our medical system. All I could do with my personal anguish was to insist that our report include at least a box on the dead boy, who was not a victim of police repression, but whose cruelly cut short life would tell us something about why people struggled and how anyone who struggled was branded a Naxalite by the state. Given today's debate on Naxalism and violence, I remember Harnandan's response when I saluted him for his struggles: "Yes," he replied, "but when we do we are dubbed as Naxalites, and hounded or even shot down for raising a voice against oppression."

I went on a fact-finding mission to Bhagalpur in 1990, after the terrible killings that razed homes in the city – my notes of our first night there have a line, "The weavers' settlement looks like a bombed city, a kind of Mohenjodaro." Killers transferred the bodies of victims from wells to ponds to fields and then planted cauliflower on the land. It was the first time that some of us confronted the painful fact that right-wing women were complicit in the killings of other men and women from their own neighbourhoods. It was also the first time that I personally became aware of male sexual violence and obscenities at the verbal level painted as graffiti across the walls of sacred places, describing the sexual takeover of a community by the rioters. With more than one thousand dead in villages and in the town, it was an extraordinary 'riot', the real experimental laboratory of Hindutva, long before Gujarat, 2002. Somehow, it did not hit the headlines as it should have done, perhaps because there were no 24x7 TV news channels, vying with each for breaking the news back

then. For some of us, it was a chilling encounter with the strategies of Hindutva, and the complicity of women in the killings was like a collapse of the dream of 'sisterhood', a real shock. The investment made by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in drawing intellectuals into their mobilisation was another blow to notions of a liberal secular intelligentsia that would withstand religious hatred. The VHP town president, a sociology professor in the university, told us pointedly: "This land that you 'leftists' consider to be gobar [dung] land because you cannot mobilise here is the land of gold for us: what we throw into the soil comes back to us a hundred fold." The VHP had used the land hunger of the Other Backward Classes to direct them against the Muslims in the villages – a classic ploy of right-wingers from the time of Hitler.

I was involved in a few more fact-finding missions, one in Kashmir, the paradise I had never gone to as a tourist, but visited with a group of democratic rights activists (the term 'human rights' has begun circulating only recently), 'led' (though not in a formal sense) by the wonderful Balagopal, who too has left us too early. He taught us some of the ground rules of talking to the establishment: listen with complete dispassion even as they spew rhetoric at us, whereas I would try to pick holes in their versions, getting angrier by the minute. The team had more women than men in it and so our report turned out to be more gender inclusive than many others before it. We met Parveena Ahangar, the woman whose son was picked up by security forces and then 'disappeared'. Parveena went to court to ask the authorities what had happened to him, also went in search of him to every possible jail in the country, but till today she doesn't know what became of him. Her struggle, as part of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons, is to challenge the impunity that the Indian state has arrogated to itself, to demand that it be accountable to the people. As she says, "We want to know what happened to our sons,

brothers, fathers. Did the sky eat them up, did the earth swallow them?" Till today she and other parents have been given no answers, and there are not enough of us outside Kashmir to hold the Indian state accountable.

But we have had some impact elsewhere, especially within our fraternity. For a while I have been saying that we have an unacknowledged 'sexual' division of labour, among academics, of course, but also among democratic rights activists: while the men do analyses and reports on class and state oppression, the women do women's studies and document women's oppression. With some persistence, we have managed to make some small changes: for example the women's component of PUDR led the organisation to address the violations of women's democratic rights in the context of what I call custodial violence (*not* 'honour killings', please!) by fathers against their daughters for forging inter-caste marriages, which was a spin-off from a fact-finding mission in Haryana over the lynchings of dalits in Dullna. This follows an earlier initiative by PUDR when dowry violence was documented, as was rape in police custody.

Some informal sexual division of labour persists: documenting the massive sexual violence in Gujarat was the work of two women's fact-finding teams. Women's groups then set up an all-women tribunal: the International Initiative on Justice for Gujarat. As part of that tribunal, I learnt a lot – listening to testimonies of young girls that skirted direct descriptions of sexual assaults upon them, retelling the stories in a way that made a semblance of meaning for them, making it possible to somehow go on living. These carefully reworked accounts helped us to understand the complexities of bringing sexual violence into the public domain: it was the difficulties of providing access to justice and bringing a trial to a satisfactory conclusion, and the absence of reparations, including counselling, that pushed sexual violence under the

carpet. This concern with sexual violence in conflict situations grew, spilling over into endemic conflict zones like the north-east and Kashmir. An all-women fact-finding team looking into the sexual violence against two young women in Shopian, Kashmir, in 2009, was a natural outcome of this concern. Sadly, we failed to counter the machinations of the state, using its power to transfer an independent judge and make the Central Bureau of Investigation say what it wanted it to say, thus scotching investigations against the security forces.

Each of these rounds of collective engagement has been an important part of my work as a feminist. They have helped us to move beyond pain and think about ways in which the impunity enjoyed by both the state and sections of 'civil' society can be countered by legal mechanisms that address sexual violence through two new initiatives: the Communal Violence Bill and amendments to criminal law through a separate chapter on sexual offences which conceptualises them from a feminist perspective. This has meant months and years of working together with others, of agonising over the ironical situation in which we try to lobby the very state that has legislated impunity clauses and has watched or engineered riots and killings itself.

The frustrations and contradictions of such joint ventures are immense; nevertheless, they have spawned new commitments, new collective journeys. Some have even been fun – like making a film with an all-women crew about the elusive histories of women – or have required the crossing of 'borders and boundaries' to Lahore, to teach, of all things, not history, but history as part of women's studies to a bunch of South Asians whose histories have now moved in such different directions. This was an opportunity I had for the first time in my life, not here in Delhi, but 'there', across the border (which I have, just this year, been able to walk across because I am over sixty-five!). It was chastening to listen to Partition stories

by students from 'there', handed down to them by their parents and grandparents, as we have done here. And it was wonderful, too, to listen to Iqbal Bano sing Faiz's *Hum Dekhenge*, almost as if she were singing for me because I had crossed the border and told her I would not return without hearing her sing that one song. It was an experience I will never forget, especially now that she is gone.

Like so much else... But that, I suppose, is what history is all about. As the Buddha said, "Nothing is permanent, all is transient: the world is full of change." So even the terrible times we live in *will* change and, hopefully, for the better. Or so I tell myself to somehow keep going...



Ritu Menon has been in publishing for over thirty-five years, the last twenty-five as a feminist publisher, having co-founded Kali for Women in 1984. Her personal, professional and political involvement with the women's movement in India and South Asia introduced her to activism for social change and opened up new vistas of research, writing and publishing. She has written and published widely on women, and is co-author, among others, of *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, and *Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India*. She has also edited several anthologies of women's fiction; of interviews; and of poetry.

She is a founder member of Women's WORLD, an international free-speech network of women writers dealing with the gendered nature of censorship, through which she has worked with over three hundred writers in South Asia in workshops, seminars and colloquia. She was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India in 2011.

Writing Women

RITU MENON

THERE can be many points of entry into a memoir, many ways of beginning it, and quite often one is forced to privilege one of several, equally important, turning points in the life of a feminist over many others. I suppose I could begin with what my grandmother said to me when I finished college: "Apni taghdir apni muthi mein rakhna" (make sure your destiny is in your hands). She was 'illiterate', married at twelve, but far more progressive than any of her children, as I found when I was growing up. Or I could say that I never really experienced any overt discrimination growing up as a girl in a middle class, urban, professional family in Delhi, that I took it for granted that whereas my parents would readily finance my brother if he wanted to study abroad, I would have to get a scholarship to do so. Many other such examples come to mind.

But a feminist memoir surely has a different trajectory, should start at the point when awareness is created or, as they (we) used to say, when consciousness is raised. At any rate, that is where I'd like to begin: in the 1960s, while doing my MA in the US, when campuses were bristling and spilling over into the civil rights movement, anti-Vietnam protests, draft-dodging or, rather, conscientious objection and, incipiently, the women's movement. A certain inchoate awareness was definitely stirring within me – I participated in demonstrations

and sat in on meetings, but personally I was still on the sidelines, a foreigner with no real stake in that society.

There was no escaping the tidal wave created by Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, however, especially as, after my graduation, I happened to be working with the publishing house, Doubleday, in New York. They published Kate Millett in 1970. It was as if, suddenly, the dam had burst – articles, essays, op-eds, denunciations, sit-ins, rallies and demos, pamphlets swirling, caucuses forming – an explosion of activity and debate that swept one along, like it or not. The Boston Women's Health Collective brought out the first edition of *Our Bodies Ourselves* in 1969; in 1970, Shulamith Firestone published *The Dialectic of Sex* and Robin Morgan edited *Sisterhood is Powerful*; in March 1970, Florence Howe founded The Feminist Press, now the oldest women's press in the world.

A book can change one's life, they say. Millett's *Sexual Politics* didn't change my life but it certainly ignited a spark; it was only much later that the spark became what the dancer Chandralekha called "the fire of consciousness". In 1969, I got married in New York to Krishna Menon, an architect who had been a student at Columbia University at the height of the agitation by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in Morningside Heights. The SDS leaders, Mark Rudd and Tom Hayden (who later married Jane Fonda), were his colleagues in the urban planning department, and they succeeded in making Columbia change its admission criteria for Black applicants from the inner city so that more of them could enter. Change was definitely in the air. Across Europe and the US, students' movements had radicalised politics by coming out on the streets in great strength and forcing the establishment to take note. Powerful slogans like, "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" brought the horrors of the Vietnam war into American living-rooms; Blacks finally got the vote;

and women like Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug and many others crystallised the women's movement into a powerful force for change.

Why then did we decide to return to India at this point, unlike most of our Indian friends and relatives in the US? Why leave when so much was happening around us, when our prospects were so bright? Perhaps it was the idealism of the Sixties that had rubbed off on us, for we felt that whatever we might manage to do in the US, was much more worthwhile if done at home. So we chucked up our coveted jobs, surrendered our green cards and came back to Madras in 1970, where my husband had a job with a firm of architects. Those first six months back in India were awful, and I bitterly regretted our decision. Madras was parochial and conservative, light years away from the energy and ferment of New York. I was miserable. The oldest and most venerable newspaper in the city said it was an unwritten policy that it would not hire women, and there were no openings in the two publishing houses to which I applied. When I finally got a job with a premier advertising agency, I found its copywriting department was staffed entirely by women because then they wouldn't need to interact with male clients! That was the job of accounts executives. A dear colleague (whose husband was regional manager of a large multinational company) regularly turned up at work with a black eye and bruises, but no one then was talking about domestic violence.

Well, books did ultimately change my life, but not in any way I could have anticipated – books and women, I should say, because the two have gone hand-in-hand now for the last thirty-five years or more. In 1972, Gloria Steinem – whose writing I had read in the brash new magazine, *New York* – set up *Ms.* magazine and the excitement of its first issue, in which it exposed the cosmetics industry, was hard to beat. Hard on its heels was Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, followed by

Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, and Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*. Of course, I was nowhere near New York, was actually in Delhi by now, but back in publishing, and the book trade was abuzz with the success of these books and the impact they were making. On the ground, too, the earth was shifting, though gently.

In 1979, the government-appointed Committee on the Status of Women in India published the results of its nationwide survey in a landmark report, *Towards Equality*. Its conclusions were sobering, if not shocking; through extensive field studies, statistics and anecdotal accounts, it demonstrated that, after three decades of Independence and two decades of planned development, women lagged far behind men on every single indicator – except, perhaps, morbidity and mortality. Systemic and systematic discrimination and subordination ensured that their rights were not attainable, and that equality was illusory. The report's impact was stunning.

But this was not the only source of disquieting news. In 1978, a group of women in Delhi had formed a collective which would soon publish a periodical magazine, *Manushi*, which was made up of first-hand experiences, reports from the ground (what was later called 'grassroots'), film and book reviews, poetry, fiction, analysis, essays, commentary – in short, any and every subject concerning women and their status in society – and its coverage was pretty damning, too.

In many ways, both *Manushi* and *Towards Equality* were a powerful expression of the second phase of the women's movement in India, the first being pre-Independence and nationalist. If we hadn't had one, we may not have had the other, and it's almost a truism now to say that they worked in tandem; just as it's more or less a fact that the majority of women in the Indian women's movement came from some kind of involvement, formal or informal, with left and labour politics.

A less explicit connection is usually made between the women's movement and women's studies, however, even though the link between activism and academics in the women's movement here is one of the strongest in the world. Very soon after the appearance of *Towards Equality*, the University Grants Commission (UGC) set up thirty-three women's studies centres in universities across the country, and appointed Madhuriben Shah as UGC chairperson; she radicalised the notion of education by saying that activism was its third arm, the other two being teaching and research. A seed had been sown, and it germinated rapidly.

Looking back, I can say that there have been two turning points in my life: the 1960s, a decade of exhilarating political awareness and activism across the world with far-reaching consequences for students and other progressive movements; and the 1980s in India, where social, environmental and women's movements were waging major change.

1984 changed my life. Urvashi Butalia and I set up Kali for Women, India's first feminist publishing house, and Indira Gandhi was assassinated. The two events were not connected in any way – that both happened in the same year is sheer coincidence, but the fact remains that, as a consequence, my life would never be the same again.

For some years before Kali was founded, I had been developing a women's studies list called Shakti at Vikas, the publishing house where I then worked. It was growing slowly but steadily and I was enjoying it, but I doubt that I would ever have thought of starting something on my own. That was Urvashi's idea, and a happy accident led to our joining up to get Kali going. With the active support of our four wonderful trustees – Devaki Jain, Subhadra Butalia, Dharma Kumar and Kamla Bhasin – who believed in us and in the enterprise, and with a queenly capital sum of Rs. 1,000, we began operating from the garage in my house. (How many stories there must

be in India of women who started out in garages and then made their mark far beyond the front gate!) Kamla helped us get our first small grant (for Radha Kumar's evergreen *The History of Doing* and Devaki Jain and Diana L. Eck's *Speaking of Faith: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change*); Devaki initiated us into DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), where we met Fatima Mernissi, Gita Sen, Peggy Antrobus, Marie-Angélique Savanne, and many others for the first time; and Dharma and Subhadra put their considerable weight behind us. That first meeting of DAWN in Bangalore in 1984 was a prelude to the UN End of Decade Conference on Women in Nairobi, in 1985, and I still think it was one of the most wonderful international gatherings of women because everyone was so full of hope. So sure we could change things.

Beginnings are always the most exciting part of any new adventure, and Kali was excitement plus exhilaration. Research on women from a feminist perspective was new, the creative writing was new, the issues were staring you in the face, the energy of the women's movement was phenomenal, and we were at the heart of the generation of ideas and analyses. And of resistance.

Never before had the personal, the political and the professional come together in such an extraordinary way for me. The political climate of the 1960s had been hugely important, but it didn't have an impact on either my personal or professional life. And back in India, my professional life had so far only tangentially connected to the political. This confluence was something else altogether, and it made me realise just how critical the personal is in any feminist endeavour.

I believe one of the biggest challenges for most men today is to remain married to a feminist, because if anyone is called upon to *live* their feminism, it's them. I'm not saying it's easy

for women, just that it's so much more difficult for men to voluntarily relinquish privilege. Not too many men of my acquaintance have been able to do this, but, without a doubt, my husband is one of them. Fundamentally egalitarian – as Gertrude Stein says, "...you must have deep down, as the deepest thing in you, a sense of equality" – and completely secure in himself, his feminism is probably more genuine than mine in many ways, and is put to the test more often. Thank goodness for him, because I've lost friends and I've lost family. I've had to come to terms with both these painful consequences and offset them against a whole new world of amazing friendships with women whom I wouldn't otherwise have ever met or known. Friends have become my authors, authors have become friends, and it's difficult now to tell one apart from the other.

So – a garage, two women (and later, one young man who, with great forbearance, stayed with us for more than ten years) and more ideas than we could find time for in those first few years. Thinking up subjects, commissioning writers, anticipating issues, debates and discussions, demos, meetings, protests, celebrations...discoveries.

I will never forget the sheer ebullience of the First International Feminist Book Fair in London in 1984. Feminist writers and publishers from all over the world gathered to celebrate not only the power of the word, but also the solidarity of women in print. Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Buchi Emecheta, Fatima Mernissi, Nawal El Saadawi and Alifa Rifat, Barbara Smith, Ellen Kuzwayo, Gert Brandenberg, Suniti Namjoshi and Madhu Kishwar – the whole surge and potential of the international women's movement, it seemed, was there for all to see at Covent Garden, producing the knowledge and providing the perspective that would transform the world. Kali had no books, no authors, nothing to sell – but we covered our trestle table with our flyer, and the striking logo

that Chandralekha had designed for us caught the attention of almost everyone who passed by. How Covent Garden buzzed with the excitement of hearing these amazing women speaking of things in a way that had never been heard before. *Call Me Woman*, by Ellen Kuzwayo from Soweto, became a kind of cult classic, just as Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel, *Nervous Conditions*, became the byline for post-colonial Africa. Nawal's *Woman at Point Zero*, Suniti's *Blue Donkey Fables*, Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*, Susan Griffin's *Pornography and Silence*...books that presented not just one woman's experience, not one particular society's foibles, not exceptional situations, but a whole new perspective based on a shared history of inequality. I realised then what it meant to be at the centre of opinion-making, of originating and, as the years went by, of the challenges that working on the periphery and at the margins entailed. Yet, without the kind of solidarity and support we got from feminist presses across the world – Virago, The Women's Press, des Femmes, Orlanda, Frauenoffensive, The Feminist Press, Spinifex, Horas y Horas – our own international visibility would have been much, much longer in the making.

The power of the word. It was Fatima Mernissi who first said, "Writing is a subversive activity in patriarchal societies." Much later, Kamla coined the slogan, "I'm learning how to write, so that I can write my own destiny." And then Vandana Shiva who, when I asked her to write about women and the environment after the Nairobi conference, said, "But I'm not a writer, I'm an activist," and I told her what Fatima had said about writing...

I've always seen our publishing as the bridge between the women's movement and women's studies, but equally and as importantly, as a medium for our activism, a sentiment that is quite alien to the profession in India. We weren't unusual in this – all publishing that is ideologically driven is activist, political in a very fundamental sense; but in a country where

illiteracy among women is high and access to books elusive, our publishing 'activism' seemed to be stretching the point. But the power of the word extends beyond the printed page, and the galvanising effect of word-of-mouth showed us just how right Fatima was, and just how subversive women's writing could be, no matter which language it was written in, no matter that the majority of women might not be able to read it. It could still strike a blow for equality and make a difference.

Those feminist book fairs of the Eighties and Nineties in countries across the world – the UK, Norway, Canada, Spain, the Netherlands and Australia – represented a unique and historic moment in women's writing and publishing; apart from being instrumental in encouraging an explosion of creativity, they forged a community of women who, together, transformed the meaning of a book fair. Long before the literary festivals and high-voltage book events of today, these fairs, organised by a handful of women with no infrastructure, no 'secretariat' and very little money, managed to combine celebration with good business, politics with literature – *and* spread the word far and wide!

Closer home, there were so many other networks we were part of, with whom we collaborated on projects, on research, and on publications. The earliest of these were Isis International in Rome and the Pacific and Asian Women's Forum, with whom we published at least two books: on women and media and on women, development and religion. There was the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo; Simorgh and Applied Socio-Economic Research in Pakistan; the Asia Pacific Development Centre in Kuala Lumpur; the International Women's Tribune Centre in New York; Women's Feature Service in Italy and India; the DAWN network; and PP 21 in Hong Kong. And, of course, any number of women's organisations in India.

Almost all the books we published in the early years grew out of issues that the movement took up – violence, dowry deaths, media images, rape, safe contraception, the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), identity politics, the environment, feminism itself, and so on – so that, in a way, research followed activism and the writing took up current debates and moved them forward. Romila Thapar, Vandana Shiva, Diana L. Eck, Devaki Jain, Bina Agarwal, Indira Jaising, Kamla Bhasin, Kumkum Sangari, Radha Kumar, Tanika Sarkar, C.S. Lakshmi, Kumari Jayawardena, Uma Chakravarti and many, many others were first published by Kali, introducing and analysing issues from a gender perspective that is now very much a part of mainstream discourse. To all the old issues have been added, now, protracted conflict and militarisation, ethnic and communal violence, deepening poverty, food security, terrorism and fundamentalism, state violence against women – the list seems endless. Sadly, not much seems to have changed for women in South Asia over the last twenty-five years.

But what does all this have to do with Indira Gandhi? Well, never in my serious moments did I think I would ever be a writer, probably because I knew how easy it is to dive headlong into the many pitfalls that await! Mrs. Gandhi's assassination changed that. Or, rather, its aftermath did. Delhi and many other cities in north India burned as arson, looting and the cold-blooded murder of Sikhs held them in their grip for three long days and nights. When the fires abated, the one lament that rose from the ashes was, "It's worse than what happened at Partition."

That statement was chilling. In one stroke it rekindled memories of the horror and carnage of 1947-48, the dislocation, the uprooting, the blind and brutal reality of

revenge. Hindu-Muslim, Muslim-Sikh, in a vicious, bloody, cycle of reprisal.

Ours was a Partition family that left Lahore for Delhi in 1947 – unwillingly and under duress. And although that leaving formed the backdrop against which all kinds of betrayals and disloyalties were recalled, I realised now, in 1984, how little we actually knew about what had happened. How seldom we questioned our identities, how spontaneous was our acceptance of nationalism, how charged the notion of blood and belonging. But all this came later. Then, in the wake of the anti-Sikh killings, my first thought was: what became of the widows of 1947? The homeless? The hopeless, the ones without succour?

That marked the beginning of a ten-year journey, an attempt to recover the history of women's experience of Partition and, through their accounts and their lives, to write another history, to surface a parallel narrative that would counter, or at least supplement, the master narrative of nation-building and bring women into the historical record. But how to do it? Where to begin? How does one write an alternative history?

Well, we began, Kamla (Bhasin) and I, in the only way we knew how – by talking to the women who survived Partition and were willing to share their experiences with us. We realised that the only 'history' we could do was an oral one, and so we set out on one of the most fascinating, harrowing, yet satisfying, journeys that I have ever undertaken. I do think now that our feminist reconsideration of Partition historiography, challenging received wisdom on secularism and on the nation-state and its patriarchal attitudes, opened up this traumatic event to more subaltern, less nationalist enquiries, released it from the grip of disciplinary history, and encouraged more interdisciplinary, multi-textual analyses. My own preoccupation with it continues to this day, expanding beyond India's borders

into Pakistan and Bangladesh, where it still awaits serious study.

I don't any more know which is more important for me, my writing or my publishing. Like the personal/political twinning of the women's movement and women's studies, both activities are now so closely linked that they are inseparable.

It seems to me, then, that the study that Zoya Hasan and I did on the status of Muslim women in India (from 1998 to 2002) was a logical development of all the thinking, campaigning and writing that we had been engaged in for years on the vexed issue of religious identity, personal laws and women. Long before the government-appointed Sachar Committee presented its findings, our national survey of 10,000 households had already highlighted, with statistical evidence, the glaring disparities and discriminations faced by Muslim women. Most importantly for us, it established that regional differences and general development indices were far more significant determinants of their status than religion – women in Kerala or Tamil Nadu, while Muslim, could in no way be compared to their sisters in Kashmir or Assam or Uttar Pradesh or Bihar on the basis of religion alone. Indeed, they might have more in common with scheduled and backward castes across the country, with whom they share not religion but extreme poverty and social disadvantage. The implications of this for policy making were crystal clear, it seemed to us, and we tried, whenever and wherever possible, to drive home the importance of providing a secular education to women and access to services and schemes that would enable their employment.

However, all this writing and publishing on women's oppression and subordination was beginning to get me down. Little did we imagine, in the DAWN days, that when day broke it would herald the death of socialism and the unbridled

triumph of capitalism. No matter where we looked or how hard we tried to change things, the picture was still pretty dismal, and new conflicts in Kashmir, the north-east, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, even Bangladesh, were pushing countries to the brink. Which meant that women were more vulnerable than ever. After co-authoring a book on women resisting violence in India with Kalpana Kannabiran, I found I couldn't write another line on violence. I had run out of words, I didn't have a vocabulary to describe it any more. It seemed to me that I had entered what the poet Meena Alexander calls, "a zone of radical illiteracy".

And so it was almost with a sense of relief that I returned to literature, to the power of literary language, through an organisation of which I was, quite by chance, a founder member. This was an international free-speech network, based in New York, called Women's WORLD, the latter standing for World Organisation for Rights, Literature and Development. Its premise was simple – and obvious: that culture is an essential component of any development activity, and literature, or 'voice', one of the most potent means of communication. It came into being in 1995, pre-Beijing, as a direct consequence of the defence of the Bangladeshi writer, Taslima Nasrin, and securing her safe passage out of Bangladesh after the publication of *Shame*. Its second premise was that censorship is gendered – it manifests differently for women, for whom the question of 'voice', of utterance, is central to control by society, culture, patriarchy, religion, politics – you name it. Not formal censorship, but all the informal, implicit embargoes as well as the explicit prohibitions that, in fact, pre-empt formal censorship. Taslima's was only the most glaring of 'transgressions'. As the poet and writer Nabaneeta Dev Sen says, "A woman's writing is her gesture, and like all gestures, is governed by social codes."

In 1999, Women's WORLD collaborated with Asmita (a

women's resource centre in Hyderabad) to organise a series of workshops with women writers in ten Indian languages, to discuss and explore the circumstances in which women write and are read, in order to examine the link between gender and genre; language and gender; gender and censorship. Through these extended conversations with more than two hundred writers over the next ten years, Vasanth Kannabiran, Volga, Ammu Joseph, Gouri Salvi and I came to grips with the complicated relationship between culture, censorship and voice, and how it impacts women's writing. What a rich vein we were able to tap and what a world of meanings we encountered and uncovered, some of which we put together in the two volumes of in-depth interviews we did with fifty of the writers who participated in our workshops; and, most recently, an anthology of poems by fifty-four women, translated from ten languages. This continuing association with writers and their work has been one of the real luxuries of the last few years, a source of endless pleasure and fulfilment.

But tensions at work were building up between Urvashi and me, not to do with the publishing at all, about which we were in complete accord, but over our styles of functioning, which were now becoming irreconcilable. The question of how to sustain small organisations while being non-hierarchical, flexible and democratic in structure is a challenge for all of us, but this is hardly the place for elaborating on that. Suffice it to say that, after some years of trying to work out an acceptable *modus operandi*, we finally bifurcated Kali into two successor organisations in 2003, with both of us now working independently of each other, but continuing what we had been doing as Kali. It wasn't, and hasn't been, easy, it coincided with one of the most difficult periods in my life, personally, and the break was almost unbearable, but in the long run it's made for a healthier state of affairs – and, looking on the

brighter side of things, we now have two feminist publishers in place of one. In the larger context of feminist publishing worldwide, this can only be a good thing because there are so few feminist presses left today. In their heyday, there were enough and more to sustain half a dozen feminist book fairs with participation in the hundreds; now, there are only as many presses left as can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

The opening up of mainstream publishing to the broad range of women's writing offers women writers the freedom to choose from a variety of options, but as more and more of them exercise their choice in favour of trade and academic presses (for very valid reasons, it must be said), those very many women in print who initially took the risk – relying, as Linda Gardiner says, on “sweat-equity and tremendous word-of-mouth publicity” – find their very survival at stake. The impact of bookstore chains on feminist bookshops in the US, for example, has been devastating. In 1998, their number dropped from 110 to 85 – a fall of 25 per cent – and most bookshops in towns where the superchains have opened have seen their book sales drop by about 15 to 40 per cent. Only six years earlier, in 1992, their combined sales were more than \$35 million. Their expenses, however, remain the same, as does their commitment to their communities, and to selling feminist books.

The importance of being economically viable is not lost on feminist publishers, but because their objective is primarily to be true to their politics as Susan Hawthorne says, they walk a tightrope. The skill lies in combining the commercial with the political – but there's the rub. For feminist publishing, or publishing for social change, is by definition, a ‘developmental’ activity in every sense of the word. It's a long-term investment

involving the surfacing or excavating of hitherto unremarked or unacknowledged work; often initiating research or writing on subjects that have been ignored or discounted; working closely – and uneconomically, it might be added – over long periods with authors; above all, developing material, awareness, skills, writers and markets and, not least, developing a readership. This is more or less true, generally, but particularly so in countries of the South. Not only are we unable to provide advances or other inducements to our authors, we are also simultaneously engaged in publishing the kind of movement-related material that no commercial publisher will take up: reports, primers, handbooks, training manuals, and so on. Slow gestation, low returns and difficult marketing characterise this kind of material which many may not even classify as ‘books’ or ‘monographs’, for much of it is fragmentary and documentary in nature. Because it is unsuited to the retail trade, it needs to be marketed differently – through non-governmental organisations, alternative networks, in trainings and workshops, at women's caucuses, conferences and seminars. All of this requires networking and dogged perseverance of a kind that commercial publishing is unable and – and, what's more, unwilling – to invest in, because its interest lies in ‘movement as market’, not movement as resistance.

Notwithstanding the fact that feminism's singular contribution to the women's movement has been in erasing the distinction between the personal and the political, there is a lingering sense in which many of us, writers and publishers, tend to think of feminist presses as publishing the more movement-oriented personal/political writing and academic or university presses as taking on the theoretical, women's studies, social science or research-based critical work. Yet there is no reason why this should be so; why, as the women's movement and women's studies began to generate the wealth

of writing that we see today, women's presses did not take up the more academic kind of publishing as well; and women writers – feminist, academic, activist, creative – did not continue to support them, to inform our practice with our politics.

In India, where women's studies has still to be formalised in a major way, and feminist academics quite genuinely think of themselves as activists too, this distinction is even more puzzling. Part of the explanation lies in the fact that there are only a couple of feminist or women's presses publishing regularly on women. But the rest of it clearly has to do with another reality – which is that the terrain is far more uneven today than it was even a decade ago. The spontaneous, cause-related support and solidarity of earlier days has given way to more careful allegiances, sensitive to questions of race, class, caste and location. Global sisterhood and the force of international feminism notwithstanding, our struggle today is marked by chasms and differences that flow, in part, from other globalisations and hierarchies of economic and political power. In order to intervene effectively in our changed reality, and do the kind of publishing that takes this different reality into account *and* works for social change, we need more than ever to be organised, reasonably solvent, and in control. Autonomy and solidarity are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, but both are notoriously difficult to sustain. For instance, since the late Eighties, several feminist presses all over the world have either closed down or been bought over by mainstream publishers and, of the three new ones that I know of that came up in the Nineties, only a couple publish more than ten to twelve books a year. The few older, independent ones are finding the going tough by their own admission. Obviously, they cannot compete with large trade and academic presses, and why should a writer, feminist or otherwise, forego a good offer? Yet, the most poignant outcome

must surely be the strengthening of the very power structures of wealth and knowledge that we continue to resist and dismantle through our writing. This is the dilemma that feminist writers face: on the one hand, a solidarity with the politics of the women's movement and an ideological commitment to women's studies; on the other, the greater visibility and acceptance that comes from being on the side of the powerful. And, perhaps most important, the phenomenon known as 'mainstream' has, in a sense, blunted the interventionary potential of feminist analysis.

One of the most remarkable facts of the women's studies movement has been its success in gaining acceptance and grudging respect for feminist analyses within mainstream academic disciplines. This, despite the fact that no degrees are offered at the undergraduate level anywhere in the country, apart from at a couple of colleges, and that texts can only be recommended, not prescribed. Although the odd book or two may find its way into specific courses, the way syllabuses are drawn up precludes the greater part of feminist scholarship from reaching students. In my view, this has had an impact on research priorities – certainly over the last decade or so there has been less and less empirical work done from a gender perspective, but more and more reports and commissioned papers written for conferences and international institutions. Yet, the field is wide open, crying out for the kind of solid empirical enquiry that will contribute to theory-building, in the way that earlier work on the ground refined our understanding of violence against women, rape, dowry, reproductive health, censorship, personal laws, sexuality, ethnicity and communalism, peace – and war, the environment, and so many, many other issues.

I have been trying for years to commission a good book on HIV/AIDS, written with a focus on women and based on the, by now, considerable first-hand information we have on it,

but have been disappointed. Similarly, we haven't even begun to explore the vast riches promised by biographies, hidden histories or memoirs. All of which means, I suppose, that there's any amount of material left to discover, write and publish still!



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In Step with the Movement

VIBHUTI PATEL

I was born in Vadodara on June 18, 1955, and was raised according to the code of conduct and value system of the Patidar community of Kheda district, central Gujarat. My early childhood experiences about the status of women in our community and neighbourhood were quite unnerving. In my father's family, I grew up hearing stories of such-and-such relative practising female infanticide; or that the daughter-in-law in a particular family was molested by her brother-in-law or father-in-law; that so-and-so was sent back to her parents' home for not bringing an 'adequate' amount of dowry; and so on. My own family was progressive, but in the neighbourhood I witnessed wife-beating, routine discrimination against girls, caste-based discrimination and religious segregation in day-to-day life. Principles of 'purity' and 'pollution' governed our lives, with meticulous monitoring by elderly matriarchs.

My father always worked in the public sector and moved eighteen times throughout the western, northern, eastern and north-eastern parts of India. This made my immediate family multicultural in outlook and flexible in lifestyle. All of us picked up local languages, cuisines, ways of dressing, folk traditions, music, art and literature and food habits quite effortlessly, as we mingled with the local population. We didn't remain confined to public sector officers' families.

In the late Fifties there were not enough central schools

in places where my father was posted as a civil engineer, where he supervised the clearing of forests and construction of roads, bridges, housing complexes, office premises, schools and platforms for oil exploration. Many a time, I would accompany him to the site and he would explain the nature of his work to me in the same way as he would explain it to his colleagues. I respected him for treating me in such a democratic and mature way. I took a keen interest in whatever I saw and asked him several questions, but he would say, "All this is fine, but you should become a doctor and serve our society."

For my pre-schooling, I went to a school at the Bhilai steel plant that was inaugurated by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. My father proudly introduced me to Panditji and I offered him his favourite red rose. We loved the photograph with Panditji, my Papa and I. When my father was posted in Barauni and our house was submerged during floods in the river Ganga that monsoon, we lost that valuable photograph along with all the household furniture. But its image has always remained in my mind!!

In Bhilai, my father was on friendly terms with the Russian engineers and his friendship extended to the whole family. As their own children were in communes in the USSR, the Russians showered their love on me and my brother, and we children picked up bits of Russian as they couldn't speak any other language. Saturday nights, they would organise film shows, mostly of the Russian revolution.

When my father was posted in Ranchi at an oil refinery, there was no school in the vicinity; and when he was transferred to Barauni, there was nothing there but forest! An Anglo-Indian teacher was assigned the task of teaching me privately at home, but my parents were really worried about my formal schooling. Moreover, they wanted to familiarise my younger brother and me with Gujarati culture, its literature, music and language, and so they decided to send me to my maternal

grandmother who lived with my maternal uncle and aunt and their three children in Vadodara.

Taste of racism

As soon as I reached Vadodara, the colour of my skin became the focal point of all jokes, taunts, aggression and insults from my peers, and of paternalistic concern from kind relatives. I was barely eight years old. As I had lived in the Hindi belt so far, I spoke in Hindi, and at times in English. This infuriated the children of our Gujarati relatives and neighbours and they would beat me and call me names like 'black crow', 'black Habshi', 'Negro', 'Jomo Kenyatta's daughter' and 'ugly duckling'. These children called me a bhoot (ghost). Later, women of my household could not stop saying, "What will happen to this black girl?" "Nothing looks good on her – nice clothes, ornaments, flowers!" They would tell my mother, "Even if you weigh her in gold, you will not find a son-in-law." I followed a policy of non-retaliation, listening quietly. I sublimated my low self-esteem by learning music, gardening, making garlands of flowers, fasting, devising educational aids for my grandma's students. At my maternal uncle's home I made no demands on anybody, quietly did whatever I was told to do – housework, homework for the neighbourhood bullies, caring for neglected and unglamorous elders...

Maniba, my role model

My grandma, Maniba, had told me, "If you want to live here, you will have to have mastery over Gujarati, only then will you make friends. You must read a lot, excel in your studies." She used to tell me stories of Gandhi, Nehru and other freedom fighters, talk to me about struggles in her life. She became a widow at twenty-eight when my mother was four years old and my uncle, twelve. She was a child bride of fourteen, married to a man twice her age. Immediately after

marriage my grandfather started educating her, and was an extremely strict teacher. She had to finish her homework before he came home from work. When he suddenly died of heart failure, she refused to shave her head and wear the maroon sari that every widow in our community was forced to wear. Her in-laws confiscated her house, land and ornaments. She approached her husband's colleague for guidance, and left her children with his family so that she could enrol for Montessori training in Bombay. Once she completed her studies and got her certificate as a qualified teacher, she approached the chairman of her husband's employer, Alembic Limited, saying she intended to start a school for the employees of the company. She became the founding teacher of Shishukunj which, in due course, became Alembic Vidyalaya. Her story of rebuilding her shattered life made my pain seem insignificant. As a child, I had noticed that my Nani commanded enormous respect from the owners and managers of Alembic and Jyoti Limited, from community leaders, parents of students, teachers and neighbours, though she was the embodiment of simplicity – wore white saris, no ornaments, and never promoted herself. Power chased her, she never chased power.

Maniba became my role model. Like her, I wanted to be a teacher and lead a simple life. She taught me not to laugh at others' speech, dress, colour of skin or eating habits, and never to be harsh with the poor, weak or elderly, not by preaching but through her day-to-day living. It was her faith in me that allowed me to develop my critical faculty and independent thinking, right from my school days. I would ask uncomfortable questions: Why was a dalit student, Savita, segregated? Why do we allow only rich people into our house? Why do we talk rudely to the toiling poor? Why are all jokes about the poor, dalits and Muslims?

When my father joined the Oil and Natural Gas

Commission in 1965, he had several postings in Ahmedabad and my brother and I now lived with them. I was the centre of their attention. My achievements – in debating, drawing, singing, reciting the *Bhagavad Gita* and academic work were applauded by both my parents who told our relatives, “Our Vibhuti will not get married. She will stay with us.” In 1967 my father was transferred to Vadodara where, as a teenager, I was always at the forefront of flood and famine relief work organised by the RSS, the only organisation working for such causes in Gujarat.

Communal riots in 1969

When I was in class X, Gujarat experienced the worst communal riots of the post-Independence period in 1969. We lived in the walled city of Vadodara, where the impact of the riots was felt greatly. Just opposite our locality was Kangalpura (meaning the locality of paupers) where Muslims lived around the Jama Masjid. During the riots their homes, shops and even the mosque were attacked and looted. In my personal life, I had had only a positive experience of hard-working, poor Muslims – masons, carpenters, petty traders – and would even accompany them on Moharram processions. During the fifteen days of the 1969 riots, I saw the most barbaric face of lower middle class and poor Hindus who stuffed their homes with what they had looted – food, footwear, plastic ware, electronic goods, utensils, clothes. I was totally shaken, lost faith in religion, stopped observing religious fasts, and started questioning everything I had learnt in the past. I had finished reading all the books in the school library – Tagore, Nehru, Gandhi, Sharatchandra, Tolstoy, Dickens, Dumas, Victor Hugo, Chekhov, Solzhenitsyn, and the major Gujarati authors of the pre-and post-Independence periods. From school I would go directly to the town hall to listen to the lectures of dacoits-turned-Gandhians, Dr. Subbarao, Rajneesh (he was

not a god-man then) but came away unconvinced, as all of them wanted women to be only volunteers and followers.

Working in a New Left group

In school I was impressed by my art teacher who talked to us about youth radicalisation in the West, about the Naxalbari movement in West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, and about revolution in Vietnam. I borrowed many books from him. He told me about a library where I could find books about these movements, and also about study circles I could join. After attending one study circle of Dr. A.R. Desai's during the summer of 1970, some of us founded a youth group called Study and Struggle Alliance (SSA) to fight against injustice. Teachers in the faculty of science at M.S. University, where I was studying, would tell students in class who were interested in my work not to associate with me because I was a 'communist' – anathema in Gujarat.

Because of my parents' insistence, I had to appear for the medical sciences entrance exam, but I left the answer papers blank. My study group had decided that I should opt for arts and specialise in economics, as the working class movement needed comrades with a deep understanding of Marxist economics. So I sat for the arts faculty entrance exam and enrolled for a B.A. with economics, mathematics and sociology as my subjects. As members of SSA, seven of us contested university elections on the slogan of “Principles, Programmes and Policy”, concerning student and youth issues. By now, my personality had taken a 180° turn. I had undergone a total metamorphosis, had become fearless, militant and focused on global and national political issues debated among the New Left. Even the dons of student politics would borrow my notes and seek my help in their studies. Nobody harassed me on the roads, even when I returned from gate meetings at 12.30 a.m. on my bicycle. In my family, my parents were very

impressed that, instead of fussing over gold, expensive clothes or eating in hotels, I was arguing with everyone about the Vietnam war, trade union struggles in Surat, literacy programmes in workers' communities, apartheid, and so on. Industrialists in my family told my mother to curb my activities each time they saw me on the streets of Vadodara, shouting slogans and waving a red flag.

I was given the job of translating important political documents from all over the world on women's liberation; on the youth uprising in Sri Lanka; the radicalisation of youth in Europe and America; and on the civil rights movement. This exercise sharpened my articulation of political issues, and by 1972 I was asked to give lectures on these subjects in study circles. During 1971-72, Com. Tariq Ali came to Vadodara twice and gave lectures based on first-hand experience of the youth movement in Sri Lanka, under the leadership of Rohan Wijeweera, and of the Bangladesh Liberation struggle against Pakistan, under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. I was highly impressed by Tariq Ali's charismatic personality and forceful style of speaking. Although there were bitter factional fights among the amoeba-like New Left groups, all factions were friendly with me as I was a foot soldier and caregiver, not a leader.

The Vadodara Kamgar Union

In 1972 factory workers, disgruntled with their respective unions, approached SSA to take up the issues of closure, lock-out, retrenchment and 8.33 per cent bonus. They told us that a law degree was not required for appearing in the labour court. Veteran Gandhian, Thakorbbhai Shah, joined us as he was heartbroken after the 1969 Congress split and was looking for an alternative. His weekly newsletter, *Prajasattak*, became the mouthpiece of our struggle. I started writing in it about youth movements in India, Sri Lanka, East Pakistan, England,

Germany and France, and what we could learn from them. Around this time youth leaders from different parts of the world came to visit our group, and we would organise their talks in the different schools and faculties of M.S. University on behalf of SSA. Under Thakorbbhai's guidance we began working with the retrenched workers of the cotton textile industry and formed the Vadodara Kamgar Union. During the Nav Nirman student agitation of 1973-74, our group was consistently active, and *Prajasattak* expressed the needs, demands and aspirations of the masses against corruption, black-marketing and the hoarding of grains by wholesale merchants.

Dr. A.R. Desai used to hold study circles on Marxism during each Diwali and summer vacation, in Vadodara. In the process we were introduced to his wife, Dr. Neera Desai, in 1972, and invited her to SSA to speak to us about the Committee on the Status of Women in India. When its report, *Towards Equality* came out in 1974, she spoke to us again. Till then my readings had been about western feminists such as Evelyn Reed, Mary Alice Waters, Kate Millet, Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir, but Neeraben was happy that I had translated several of Reed's essays from *Problems of Women's Liberation* into Gujarati.

The 1972 anti-price rise movement

The same year, 1972, all Left groups (socialists, CPI and CPM) of Vadodara put me in touch with the leaders of the anti-price rise women's organisation in Bombay, and we formed a branch of it in Vadodara. In 1974, when Ahilya Rangnekar (CPM), Mrinal Gore, Hind Mazdoor Sangh (HMS), Tara Reddy (CPI) and Manju Gandhi (CPI) visited Vadodara, we were able to organise a massive rally of five thousand working and lower middle class women that culminated in a memorable public meeting. We were impressed by these leaders' egalitarian outlook,

willingness to do physical work, intellectual self-sufficiency and fearlessness. When I learnt that Mrinaltai had given up her MBBS to work full time in the movement, I told her about the incidence of sex selective abortions through amniocentesis and chorion villai biopsies, prevalent in my community. She said, "I don't believe this. People don't get safe drinking water, how can they pay for examination of amniotic fluid? You must be reading a lot of science fiction, my girl, that's why you are getting such ideas!" My relatives from Anand used to tell me about sex determination among cows and buffaloes by the Amul Cooperative which resulted in the sex selective abortion of male foetuses, while the same test among pregnant women resulted in aborting female foetuses. I was frustrated and angry but was unsuccessful in taking up this issue publicly. It was almost twenty years later that this became a major campaign of the women's movement in India.

A National Emergency was declared in 1975, marked by detention without trial of a large number of people whom I knew – students, youths, political personalities. Censorship of news, trespassing without legal sanction into private premises, tapping of telephones, interception of letters, and constitutional amendments curtailing basic rights to life and freedom, and violation of civil liberties in the name of national security affected our day-to-day functioning, as we shared our office premises with the Western Railway Employees' Union that played a prominent role in the historic railway strike of 1974. SSA had actively supported the strike and I had also taken part in the *jail bhari* (courting arrest) movement in 1974 to express solidarity with railway workers.

From 1972 to 1977 I worked on the students' front, the workers' front and in the community, with my comrade, Amar Jesani, a student of the medical college in Vadodara. Both of us would have animated discussions on Marxism, poetry, films and our painful childhoods. He was the only hosteler in

our group, alienated from his immediate family. He was haunted by the bitter experience of the 1969 riots in Amreli, where his family's house and shop were looted and burnt with the complicity of the Gujarat police. It was the shelter given by their Hindu neighbour and the timely arrival of the Central Reserve Police that saved his family. Amar was the most hard-working, ethical, non-competitive and caring comrade in my group. I developed a close rapport with him as he was free of a mercenary instinct and did not consider cerebral women a threat. In Vadodara, even among leftists, a Hindu-Muslim liaison was a shocking thing. Family members of other comrades distanced themselves from us, which hurt us deeply, and we shared our feelings with Dr. A.R. Desai. He suggested that we leave Gujarat and settle down in Bombay. To avoid gossip, we gave notice to the Registrar of Marriages in Vadodara in July 1977 and on October 25, 1977, I arrived in Vadodara from Bombay and was married under the Special Marriages Act. Three of Amar's batch-cum-hostel mates, all medicos in the last year of MBBS, stood as witnesses to our civil marriage. The same evening I returned to Bombay, as Amar and they had to appear for their exams.

The day I received my M.A. results I left Vadodara with Dr. A.R. Desai, boarded the train with him and arrived at his house. Both Neeraben and her son, Mihir, welcomed me, introduced me to the city, guided me, drew maps for me to negotiate the different suburbs of Bombay, and explained the intricacies of the suburban railway system. I stayed with them for a week and emerged a well-informed Mumbaikar! Neeraben's house was my second home – in times of ill-health, ups and downs in life, and for emotional support. It was an intellectually and politically charged environment, and their interest in music, art, poetry, songs, vegetarianism, and great tolerance towards ideological differences was a tonic for a young political activist like me.

It was in 1979, when I went to see her with Madhu Kishwar, who was armed with the first issue of *Manushi*, that she confronted us sharply. In the reading list published in *Manushi*, we had mentioned Altekar, M.N. Srinivas and all those who had published books on women, but Neeraben's book, *Women in Modern India*, was not among them. This was due to our ignorance about it. We had an animated discussion on the woman question and trends in feminism, and she gave us a copy of her book. After reading it, my relationship with her took a 360° turn. From being a sympathiser of the Left movement, she became a fellow feminist.

The women's movement

The years 1977-1979 in Bombay were most exciting for me, because for the first time I heard the songs of Stree Mukti Sangathan and undertook active work on women's issues. Five of us, Rohini, Gayatri, Mira, Aruna and I, started meeting regularly to discuss the woman question, and also took up the problems of working class women. When a migrant housewife was raped in her hut in Mayanagar, Worli, we decided to plunge into action. We issued a leaflet in Hindi and Marathi and declared our group the Socialist Women's Group. In the post-Emergency activism around democratic rights, we came into contact with women who had suffered during Emergency rule. Cases of custodial rape were reported by newly-formed organisations such as the Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights (CPDR) of which I was a member. Many women activists in the people's movement were unhappy with the instrumentalist attitude of mass organisations. We wanted autonomy in order to highlight women's concerns, and decided to start a newsletter called *Feminist Network* in English and *Stree Sangharsh* in Hindi; this was in 1977. I represented our group in the state-level coordination committee of the women's liberation movement, in Pune. For the first

time, I saw women from diverse socio-economic, cultural, caste, political, educational and religious backgrounds immersed in group discussions for two days. Participants sat, ate and slept in the same premises, the assembly hall of a local school. I made so many new friends who spontaneously trusted an alien (non-Maharashtrian, recent migrant from Gujarat) like me. I learnt the meaning of 'sisterhood' in those subgroup meetings of women writers, journalists, teachers; of tribals, dalits and peasants; industrial workers, women entrepreneurs, self-employed women, bidi workers, nurses and professional women.

In 1978 we decided to hold a national level feminist workshop and produced background material in the form of a reading series, and contributions to a feminism series in cyclostyled form. Newly-formed women's groups, Stree Sangharsh and Ankur, impressed me most because of their creative way of thinking and analytical insight into understanding violence against women. Intense deliberations in the workshop convinced me that it is possible to reorganise our lives NOW, without waiting for the revolution to happen. The slogan, "Personal is Political" was raised by feminists worldwide, and now we were putting it into practice.

My extensive travelling during 1977-1979 as a member of enquiry committees looking into riot-torn areas in Marathwada (caste), Gujarat (caste and communal), Bihar (communal), Madhya Pradesh (tribal) and Assam (communal) gave me a nuanced understanding of how identity politics is played, and its implications for women.

In 1980, the anti-rape campaign of the women's movement brought out many new talents I did not know I had! I started writing songs and skits, coined slogans, wrote articles, drafted resolutions and published booklets on the women's movement. Doordarshan and All India Radio asked me to compère women's programmes based on our activism. Though we were

founders of the Forum Against Rape, within six months we expanded its scope and renamed it Forum Against the Oppression of Women (FAOW). Those were the days of street-fighting, petitioning, sit-ins, demonstrations, rallies, arrest warrants, beatings by abusive husbands and in-laws, cruel bosses and bullies. Every day, we were approached by women survivors of violence who needed institutional support. I joined Flavia Agnes, Ammu Abraham, Sujata Gothoskar and Rohini Hensman to start a women's centre that would provide counselling, legal support and crisis management for women (survivors of abuse) who approached us. We opened our homes to provide shelter to the women. There was so much media publicity around us that the pressure of work was increasing and it resulted in a burn-out. My house had become a commune.

During 1980-1988, I was actively involved in supporting women survivors of dowry harassment, sexual harassment at the workplace, rape and domestic violence. This changed my attitude to the existing legal system, the police, government offices and employers. I struggled for an immediate redressal of women's problems (job; retrieval of streedhan; child custody; share in property; school/college admission; receiving part of an adulterous husband's salary). As an organiser, I was actively involved in the first four conferences of the autonomous women's movement – 1980 and 1985 in Bombay, 1988 in Patna and 1990 in Kozhikode. I found in them an atmosphere of solidarity, strength, sisterhood, creative learning and plural sources of feminist knowledge-creation that were exhilarating. I feel terribly nostalgic about our group singing and travelling, inter-generational dialogues, an intellectually charged environment, emotionally thrilling encounters, sharing food, caring for each other in times of personal crisis or illness, and collectively determining the destiny of women through planning, policy initiatives and campaigning for legal reform.

My daughter, Lara

In 1984, my baby girl, Lara, was born, and she travelled with me wherever I went on women's movement work, for four years. She was tucked into a snugly as an infant and accompanied me on demonstrations, rallies, public meetings, and to police stations and conferences. My friends called me Ba Ba Black Sheep as I always had three bags on my shoulder – one for the baby, one for carrying feminist literature and one for my daily chores. My daughter and I talked all the time, but her schooling demanded a major change in my lifestyle. I completed my PhD in economics from the University of Bombay and took up my first job as reader in the Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT Women's the University, in 1988. Four years of multi-tasking at the university drained me completely and I needed a change; the university sent me to the London School of Economics for post-doctoral work in 1992-93, and though I had a family fellowship my husband and daughter refused to join me as they had their own priorities in Bombay. That seven-month separation was extremely painful; in my absence, the two of them bonded very closely and this continues. We have a blow-hot, blow-cold relationship now.

The demolition of Babri Masjid and ensuing communal riots throughout India in 1992-93 marked a watershed in my life. At the time I was in London and my husband and daughter were in Bombay; they experienced nightmarish episodes of communalism in my absence and for quite some time later, saw me as an individual who enjoyed the privileges of being a Hindu. They were totally distrustful of all our friends in the movement who did not belong to minority communities. I became a distant figure for Lara in the post-riot period. For the first time I found myself totally ALONE, within and outside my family. I resigned from my university job where I was taunted for being a "Muslim's wife" and was

told to "go to Pakistan". Amar had already lost his job before I returned from London. It was a terrible time.

Many of our close friends in health activism had registered a trust called Anusadhan Trust in 1990; it was activated from our drawing room and Amar became its first coordinator. In six months, CEHAT, its first project, commenced, and an unused flat of Padma Prakash's in our building became its office. During 1993–2002, I did all the housework – cooking, cleaning, looking after a daily stream of visitors to our newly-formed organisation. I also associated myself with school education at a street children's home, an orphanage and an open school for rescued child prostitutes and child labour, managed by a small Christian community in my neighbourhood. I did not pay fees for Lara's education as her school, run by Jesuits, was state government aided and provided free education to girls. Lara would walk to school.

By the end of December 2002, our savings were totally wiped out. Lara had finished school and had to join college. The political environment in Maharashtra had changed, and both of us, Amar and I, decided to build our careers. Amar left for Thiruvananthapuram to work as a research officer at the Achyutha Menon Centre for Health Science Studies, and I joined Sophia Centre for Women's Studies and Development, Mumbai. Within six months I became a reader, Centre for Women's Studies, department of economics, University of Mumbai, and in 2004, I joined as professor, department of economics, SNDT Women's University, and became director of sixteen post-graduate departments. I hope I am shaping young women's minds through teaching the economics of gender and development. Most of my feminist contemporaries have been institution builders, mentoring young women and inculcating a feminist ethos in them. For these young women, collective militant action is a STORY; they experience feminism through fighting for their individual

rights and enhancing their capacities and entitlements within an institutional framework.

And today...

Important milestones in my journey that shaped my involvement in the women's movement were my childhood experiences of discrimination; the communal riots of 1969 in Gujarat; my involvement in the New Left movement; and solidarity work for people's struggles during the 1970s.

I am so happy that the influence of feminism has grown manifold during my lifetime, so that even its adversaries can't ignore feminists. Now, wherever I am invited to speak as a feminist, I happen to know only the person who invites me, and sometimes even they are unknown. This indicates the legitimacy feminism has acquired! Teaching has allowed me to reach out to the younger generation who animatedly discuss feminism with me. My feelings about the contribution made by the women's movement are captured in this feminist version of an original IPTA song:

*It has awoken, this womanhood
At dawn's rosy portal
It has risen, a new world, that will
Banish that tired old song of suffering
That will herald a new way of thinking
It has awoken, this womanhood
And waking, has rebirthed the world
Swept clean the debris of the old
Our shackles have broken for good
It has awoken, this brave new womanhood.*



सहेली Saheli

Saheli was set up in 1981 in New Delhi, primarily as a crisis intervention centre. Early struggles against oppression and violence within marriage, family and community led to campaigns against dowry, domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, communalism, war, and discrimination against women in the law. Saheli's work on women's health includes long-standing campaigns against coercive population control policies, hazardous contraceptives, sex-determination, the unethical sale of emergency contraceptives, and vaccines against cervical cancer. Increasing conservatism, militarisation, globalisation and state repression are some of the other challenges we meet jointly with queer, dalit, adivasi and democratic rights groups, and other people's movements.

An integral part of the autonomous women's movement in India, Saheli continues today as a non-funded feminist collective, working on volunteer power, individual donations, the solidarity of friends and supporters and, of course, the strength of its conviction: that its work contributes towards the creation of an egalitarian society where women and men can live with courage, justice and hope.

Against the Odds, and often,
Against the Grain

SAHELI

FORMALLY, it was on August 11, 1981 that eight women with eighty rupees, two jharus, one notebook and a fly-swatter (not to mention, the strength of their convictions) got together to start Saheli. But from the very beginning, Saheli has belonged to countless women, been the centre of many campaigns, and the home of many more debates and action, stories and sisterhood. So how do we look back on thirty years of an intense, and yet almost amorphous, process? How do we revisit many journeys within one journey, talk of many certainties within some uncertainties, many lives within the life of one feminist collective based in New Delhi?

Saheli emerged out of the campaigns against dowry and custodial rape that swept the country, starting in the late 1970s – Mathura, Rameeza Bi, Maya Tyagi, Sudha Goel – cases that catalysed the emergence of many women's groups. Of course, women have struggled since the ages and been part of many movements, but this time we were talking about what was affecting us *as women*: our lives, our bodies and our labour; the violence with which we are routinely confronted; the silences that surround our inequity; the hold of religion on us; our sexuality; about the myriad laws governing us and about the ubiquitous role of the state in our lives.

Women's organisations came together to protest against the Sudha Goel judgement by the High Court. We were issued show cause notice, asking why contempt of court proceedings should not be issued against us. It has taken more than 30 years for independent India's women to speak out. Are we to be silenced by contempt notices?

First Four Years. Saheli, 1985

In Saheli, our understanding of these issues evolved from the support we provided to individual women and which remained our primary work for more than a decade. When we started out to create a space for women to come and share their experiences of being women in a man's world, of dealing with violent, indifferent, oppressive or incompatible marriages and families, there were no prescriptions, no manifestos or blueprints. Only a certainty that, together, women could support each other, find alternatives and create a better world.

I will never forget my first day in Saheli. Each one of them made me feel as if I had grown a couple of support pillars around me reaching out to me to help. I was the first 'case' of Saheli.

Ashima, Hyderabad, July, 2006

As our work expanded, we came to understand various other kinds of violence in which women's lives are enmeshed: sati, sexual harassment, marital rape and violence against lesbians; through our work on health, we also exposed the violence of coercive population control policies and the misuse of technology to eliminate female foetuses. Violence in its overt and implicit forms – from sexual harassment at the workplace to violence and rape by the armed forces in the north-east, Kashmir and other areas of conflict; political violence and the violence of development – has been an essential part of our interventions and campaigns. And, yet, the fact remains that from sexual violence in so-called 'normal' times to situations

of caste and communal conflict and attacks in the name of family and community 'honour', the cycles of violence and control over women's lives grow ever more pervasive.

Confronting 'Home Sweet Home' and other myths

I am the unfortunate mother a girl who was burnt at the altar of greed. Coming to Saheli, listening to the sorrows of other people, one forgets one's own sorrow. It sometimes seems that the whole world has turned its face away from us. But we have come into a new world here – we must work to end dowry, help women to stand on their own two feet.

Satyanani, First Four Years. Saheli, 1985

In the course of our early work, it became apparent that a major factor contributing to the silence shrouding violence against women within marriage and the family was the widespread perception of it as 'acceptable', a 'private' matter to be dealt with through 'adjustment' and 'compromise' (by the woman, of course!). Consequently, public discourse on the issue was extremely contentious and, not surprisingly, it was women and groups like us who got labelled 'home-breakers' for speaking out. A reality that continues unto this day with the strongest of women anxiously asserting that they are "not feminists". But to them and everyone else we say, "Never mind, but we are!" Card-carrying members in a manner of speaking...without the cards, of course!

Supporting women who suffered domestic violence and helping them recover their sense of self was not easy. To quote the Saheli newsletter of April 1987:

At our level, what we really try to get across is empathy with the woman's pain, bewilderment, insecurity, and show her that there is an alternative, which also is not easy to cope with, but that it would be her choices which count with us and not the demands and expectations thrust on her. We try giving her a sense of security, the knowledge that she is not alone in her struggle, and

show her linkages between her personal oppression and the oppression of women within our society.

Extending help, legal aid, skills-training and jobs was challenging at many other levels, too. It seemed as though every system was pitted against women. Our work constantly brought us up against patriarchal forces in the form of unsupportive families and neighbours, dismissive police constables, unscrupulous lawyers, unsympathetic magistrates and a hidebound media that persisted in blaming the victim. Even we were not spared. When we gave shelter to a young woman who wanted to leave her home, the police accused us of running a brothel and charged us with abduction!

With society and its legal machinery determinedly unwilling to accept the gravity of the problem, Saheli had to act on another front. Women who were either thrown out of their marital homes or who needed to leave didn't have any place to go: their natal homes refused to accept them and no government shelters were available. Although Saheli volunteers often took them into their homes, this was not sustainable in the long run, so we started a shelter with some financial assistance from the government. But the experience revealed what a low priority issue this was for the government, which was unwilling to pay enough for food, rent, maintenance, salaries, etc., that would ensure a reasonably decent living for the women. After about four years, and with the setting up of Shakti Shalini's shelter in 1987, ours gradually wound up.

Case-work brought us face to face with the entrenched authority of religious and community laws that denied women equal rights in marriage, divorce, maintenance, child custody, adoption and inheritance. Ironically, the very community that provided a sense of belonging was also a source of control. We learnt to develop and keep evolving our strategies even as we supported women in negotiating the complex structures of control. Direct actions, such as pressuring the husband and

in-laws to part with the woman's property or enabling a woman to take custody of her own child, remained the hallmark of Saheli's early years.

In 1991, we decided to discontinue handling new cases and review the case-work we had done. This was a difficult decision and the process of arriving at it was fraught with contradictions, with several of us feeling that helping individual women should remain a priority as long as subjugation and the threat of violence persist in society. Nor were we convinced that the issue had gained enough visibility. And, certainly, new legislation such as Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), the Crimes Against Women Cells (CAWC) of the police, counselling centres and shelters run by the state, NGOs and women's organisations were not necessarily pro-women.

Two decades later, we are still approached by women for help, and almost every time that we refer them to another women's group, the debate about closing case-work opens afresh. But ending case-work did not end our engagement with the issues at stake, for we see our campaigns to fight all forms of violence against women as intrinsically linked to each other.

Our campaigns have been geared towards raising awareness, carrying out studies, generating discussions, creating and performing street plays, taking the struggle against rape into the streets with our *Dilli Chuppi Todo, Balatkar Roko* campaign (Speak up Delhi! Stop Rape), conducting self-defence workshops, handling individual cases of sexual harassment at the workplace and working on complaints committees. Joining hands with others, we participate in efforts to reform and implement laws against the glorification of sati, sexual harassment at the workplace, domestic violence, sectarian violence and sexual assault on women, men, transgendered people and children.

Confronting communalism (and some uncomfortable questions)

Par hain to sab parde... (After all, they are all veils...)

Like most women in the movement, we too started out with an understanding, nay almost a desperate belief, that above and beyond everything, we were united by the fact of being women. But over the last two decades, the specificities of women's experiences and oppression have become clearer than ever – linked as they are to not just religious identity, but as powerfully to class and caste, sexual orientation and other hierarchies that produce countless inequalities amongst us. Consequently, we have been compelled to challenge our simplistic presumption of unity to make space for complex, contradictory allegiances, identities, politics.

Saheli's work in relation to community identity emerged from crisis intervention that brought to the fore many questions on the impact of religion, the discriminations inherent in all personal laws, the reality behind the secular state and the relevance of secularism and secular laws in the lives of women. However, working towards an egalitarian civil code was not a straightforward task in times marked by resurgent Hindu and Muslim fundamentalism and growing majority/minority community tensions. With debates and discussions, leaflets, and the performance of a street play titled, *Farq*, we reached out to visibilise the issue and challenge the state and conservatives (of all stripes) alike. But the Shah Bano controversy, the right-wing demand for a uniform civil code based on Hindu law, the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the rise of communal parties, all brought new challenges and made it nearly impossible to further the debate on women's rights with respect to personal laws; a situation further worsened by the state converting what is essentially an issue of equality for women into an issue of religious freedom and

identity. Over the years, our engagement has been with both efforts in the movement to reform personal laws, as well as the continuing struggle for egalitarian rights for all women.

Another major moment for us was during the anti-sati campaign that followed Roop Kanwar's murder in Rajasthan in 1987. It triggered questioning about the ideology of sati and its glorification, as well as the inflammatory role of politics, politicians, ministers, media and community leaders. We viewed with alarm the consolidation of links between the state and religious forces and their attempt to legitimise such anti-women practices. We highlighted the dismal position of widows and their lack of control over property and other productive resources. Issues of religion and religious/community identity had to be dealt with on the streets for the first time, as did the fact that on issues like this we were, whether we liked it or not, pitted against other women. And deeply troubled that it could be so.

In November 1984, when Delhi was torn apart by the anti-Sikh carnage that followed Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination, many of us witnessed communal violence at such close quarters for the first time. We learnt many lessons by running a relief camp and being involved in the rehabilitation of Sikh survivors (mostly women and children). The strengthening of religious identities at the cost of women's rights started emerging as a serious concern. Years later, the brutality unleashed on women in Mumbai (1993) and Gujarat (2002) further compelled us to foreground the centrality of sexual violence in such conflicts.

In a country born in the throes of communal violence and continuing to live with ruptures based on religious/caste/ethnic identity, the struggles against communalism and communal violence have always been fought on a broad platform. And so it was that during the anti-Sikh violence, the 1992/93 violence following the demolition of Babri Masjid,

the Seelampur riots of 1993, the Gujarat killings of 2002 and the anti-Christian violence in Kandhamal in 2008, we have responded jointly with other concerned groups and individuals. As part of peace initiatives, fact-finding missions, relief efforts and endeavours to evolve laws that can comprehensively address the specificity of sexual violence in situations of conflict, our work against communalism and sectarian violence goes on.

But things are at a very fragile pass today, especially for women. On the one hand, militant mobilisation of the right-wing in the name of religion, culture and tradition is increasing controls on women, both within and across communities. Aggressive moral policing, assertion of dress codes, imposition of regressive traditions and the increased ritualisation of everyday life is placing greater restrictions on women's sexuality, mobility and freedom. On the other hand, the power and violence exerted by caste and community panchayats have greater social impact today than ever before. While combating such communal and regressive forces, our attempt has been to highlight the criminality and unconstitutionality of such impositions on the lives of women and men.

Casting another look around

Since the late 1990s, we have been organising internal and public meetings that explore the various dimensions of how gender and caste intersect. Our aim has been to understand the relationship between caste-based movements, caste-based women's groups and the women's movement in general, and to strategise ways of strengthening the interconnections, with a special focus on the role that the autonomous women's movement needs to play at this particular political juncture. We have been part of a fact-finding mission on electoral violence and quashing of democratic rights in a reserved constituency; deliberated the challenges thrown up by the

brutality in Khairlanji; co-organised a session on "Caste-based Identities, Discriminations and Struggles" at the Conference of Women's Movements (Kolkata, 2006). Throughout, we have tried to develop our understanding of the patriarchal control that caste norms and boundaries exercise over all women and the challenges that this poses to women's rights and struggles.

Though our engagement with the issues of caste and gender has remained limited, we are inspired by the work done by the dalit women's movements that are pushing the boundaries to create new and vibrant alliances of issues that affect us all. In 2008, Saheli published *Talking Marriage, Caste and Community: Voices from Within*, the outcome of a study we did to understand women's experiences of religion, caste and community in their everyday lives, on issues of sexuality as determined/controlled by marriage, customs and norms.

The experience of the study, the discussions that surrounded it and the writing of the report inspired us to evolve a play in an attempt to take the issues out to a wider forum. Called *Kaum Jaat*, the play uses monologues to foreground women's experiences of community and family control on their lives.

We always celebrate the resilience of spirit with which women continue to resist such control and policing. After all, as a cartoon in one of our newsletters says, "Behind every strong woman stands a community telling her she is wrong!"

Resisting one 'unhealthy' development after another

Like a moth seeking light (and here the analogy ends), for most of our thirty years, Saheli has been drawn to issues of women's health and reproduction.

True to the tradition of autonomous women's groups, which set out with great energy and inventiveness to empower women with a knowledge of their bodies, we in Saheli also

took a modest step in this direction. Our exhibition, *Aurat ka Chamatkar* (The Magic of a Woman), was a resounding success, sought by people in medical colleges, activist groups, health groups, women's colleges, NGOs, Marie Stopes clinics and others in Delhi and elsewhere. However, we live in a populous third world country, and attempts at empowering women with knowledge of their bodies and reproduction was soon overtaken by the more urgent concerns of battling multinational drug corporations and the government, who were dumping hazardous drugs and contraceptives on us. There was little room to define what we wanted. Instead, we had to engage in the task of redefining what the government thought women wanted. We had to think of the diverse circumstances in which women live and make decisions, and highlight the implications of government policies and programmes on women's lives. We had to put women's concerns first.

Whenever an issue related to women's reproduction comes up an immediate connection, like an electrode being activated, is made to the question of population or, rather, population control. No matter what the issue, the yardstick of population control gets applied to gauge whether or not the practice is for the 'greater good' – even at the cost of ethical/legal/moral compromises. As one Saheli put it,

It was one of my early times in Saheli. There was this 'buzz' all around. If one woman was flaunting a doctor's prescription she had got while pretending to be a patient anxious about a possible pregnancy, another was showing a bill for a 'prescription drug' bought over the counter in a fake doctor's name – that of the then Drug Controller of India! Anger and excitement abounded... evidence for the Supreme Court hearing on EP drugs was coming together.

The campaign against Estrogen-Progesterone combination drugs (EP drugs) carried out along with health and consumer

groups and the Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI), set the template for several campaigns on women's health to follow: critiques of public policy – specifically, the population control policy and the two-child norm; public actions and demonstrations; creating awareness for what women really want; representations to the government; wading through countless scientific studies and unravelling the contradictions within them; and challenging the state and market forces in the courts, the media and on the streets, along with partners from all over the country and the world.

In the case of EP drugs, we successfully argued for a ban on them, demanding instead (albeit, unsuccessfully) that the government subsidise the cost of the available urine test for pregnancy. With Norplant, our case was that it was absolutely unjustifiable for the government, its research agencies and health infrastructure to subject tens of thousands of women to the hazardous hormonal implant. We opposed rampant sex determination and elimination of female foetuses through a vibrant campaign that involved everything – from a door-to-door signature campaign to a presentation on the issue to the joint parliamentary committee! In the fight against chemical sterilisation of women with Quinacrine, one of our key contributions to the joint campaign was researching and publishing a report that exposed the nefarious population control agenda and blatant market opportunism that surrounded the method. Working in tandem with other groups, we have managed to keep the controversial injectable contraceptives, Depo-Provera and Net-Oen, out of the government health care programme till date (though they are available in the open market), by taking the Net-Oen case to court as one of the petitioners, and fighting the international pharma industry through the media and other public means to resist the introduction of Depo-Provera. *Quinacrine: The Sordid Story of Chemical Sterilisation; Womantalk: Contraception, Safety*

and Women's Health; Enough is Enough; Injectable Contraceptive Net-Oen: A Chronicle of Health Hazards Foretold; Target Practice: Anti-Fertility Vaccine Research and Women's Health – through these reports, countless articles, talks, petitions and public action on issues related to ethical research and women's health, our struggles continue.

We raised many pertinent questions about the safety of the contraceptive and its service delivery, made it to the front pages of newspapers where our 'unladylike' behaviour (of jumping over walls to bust into a press conference) came under scrutiny, as much as the pertinent questions we had raised.

Saheli Souvenir, 2006

Saheli and the autonomous women's movement have faced a lot of criticism for our opposition to hazardous contraceptives. We are perceived as troublemakers, intent on disrupting the smooth functioning of government agencies working in the best interests of the country. Significantly, despite our 'making trouble' for nearly three decades, the establishment has not yet been able to address any of our concerns meaningfully. 'Gender perspectives', 'gender concerns', 'safety', 'efficacy', 'effective delivery systems' – familiar words that grace the pages of many government and international agencies' documents and of the World Health Organisation. But for how long can one hide behind words?

The fact remains that women still need safe, effective contraceptives, under their control. In this day and age of market forces driving the world, hazardous contraceptives continue to be a big worry. Equally worrisome is the host of new reproductive technologies – stemming from genetic engineering, cloning, pre-implantation genetic diagnoses – creating embryo farms and promoting surrogate motherhood, that totally alter the nature of the debate in terms of 'rights', 'interests', 'choice' and, of course, 'ethics'.

Today the sceptre of global corporate ambition and state callousness has been raised on the altar of women's health or, rather, the health of young women and girls. In rural Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh, studies have been conducted on young, tribal girls for the so-called 'anti-cervical cancer' HPV vaccines that break every code of medical ethics in the country. In big cities and on satellite television, fear is being whipped up about an ostensible cervical cancer 'epidemic'. We, at Saheli, and activists from other women's and health groups, primarily in Delhi and Andhra Pradesh, have been working to combat such fear-mongering, stop the trials (which has happened), bring a halt to the advertising and challenge the so-called 'scientific' claims with more well-established facts. Clearly, the struggle for women's health and safety is far from over.

And then there's sex (and sexuality)

One of the key critiques of our (and other women's groups') work on women's health (and we were happy to join in the delayed self-flagellation) was how we remained framed by the larger discourse of population control, reproductive rights and violence, and never quite managed to move beyond them to matters of women's pleasure and desire. In the same vein, the women's movement as a whole, while taking on the 'family' and challenging its inherent patriarchal power structures and hierarchies, never quite made a significant dent in the hetero-normative notion of the 'family' itself.

Since the late 1990s, Saheli has actively engaged with wider issues relating to sexuality – namely, the rights of the LGBT (lesbians, gay, bisexual, transgender) community. The visible starting point was the furore generated by the screening of the film, *Fire*, and the protests, primarily by lesbian women, that raged around it. As part of the Campaign for Lesbian Rights (CALERI), Saheli worked with others to visibilise the issue and generate public debates. And, since its inception in

2004, we have also been part of Voices Against 377, a Delhi-based coalition of NGOs, progressive groups and individuals who filed a key intervention petition in the case at the Delhi High Court that finally decriminalised same-sex adult consensual sexual relations, by reading down Section 377 of the IPC.

Marching at Delhi Queer Pride events, facing the challenges thrown up by cases of homophobia and lesbian/gay suicides, we understand more than ever today that as the struggles of the women's movement and the queer movement are linked, so, too, is our liberation. We continue to work towards the day when sex work will be recognised as work, when dancers will be back in the bars of Mumbai, when hijras and kothis will live with safety and dignity.

Insistent on our autonomy

Saheli came into being at a time when many women from Left parties, socialist formations and people's movements were seeking political spaces that would be more responsive to women and women's issues. In such a context, our organisational autonomy from, both, political parties and the state was, and remains, central.

Collective functioning, fund-raising from non-institutional sources, issue-based alliances and solidarity actions form the core issues linked to our existence even today. The small-group collective has posed many organisational challenges, but it is an ideological reflection of a desire to be makers of our destiny in a society that has run for far too long on domination and control of socially marginalised groups like women, dalits, adivasis, sexual minorities, workers and peasants. While organising ourselves, too, we have striven to reflect, in a small way, an image of a society we wish to live in and which will be of our making. Hence, we have consistently tried to work in a non-hierarchical way, evolve

rotational power routines, share the load of 'housekeeping' the organisation, and maintain equitable systems of accountability.

Financial autonomy has also been significant as it nurtures and sustains autonomy in the most meaningful way. We are not only averse to the idea of institutionalised funding, but also to major donations from any one individual. Of course, such principles also give rise to questions about the sustainability of such an idea/ideal and, indeed, the limitations it places on who can manage to be involved in Saheli, and to what extent at any point of time.

Needless to say, the present-day challenges of institutionalised feminism are formidable. But through the changing times, we have been free to speak, articulate, organise and strategise as we thought best, on the basis of our experience and women's experiences, without any project guidelines as our determinants. And if we have made mistakes, we have also been open to learn from them.

A good question for anyone to ask is: how autonomous is the women's movement today? Traditionally, being autonomous implies freedom from the government, male structures, funding, political parties, and so on. So far, so good. But this doesn't automatically tell us: then what? In our feminist practice at Saheli over the years, autonomy has implied being watchful about how our efforts seem to get subsumed under the broad agendas set by bigger organisations, the government and donor agencies.

Over the years, our numbers have waxed and waned – from packed rooms on an ordinary day and large numbers at a protest, to just one or two women at a meeting or a handful of full-timers. Still, in 2006, during our twenty-five year celebrations, it was heartening to discover that, as one of the earliest women's groups in Delhi, Saheli has touched so many lives that it is a virtual impossibility to ever document it

completely.

I remember that deep sense of relief and 'de-alienation' as a young woman to find a common voice and to be able to work on issues that seemed so integral to my growing consciousness...

Malika, June 2006

My time in Saheli – when I was growing up, out of school, in college, understanding what life was about and generally getting a point of view – has been beautiful. Saheli shaped me up. And I am still in that shape.

Divya, July 2006

Over the years, we have together celebrated many euphoric victories together and collectively raged against countless incidents of violence that confront us every morning. Between these highs and lows, we continue to do what we can with courage, conviction and humour. After all, we are the group that improvised on Gorakh Pande's hard-hitting satire of socialism with the song, *Naarivaad, behna, dbire dbire aayi* (Feminism, sister – it's been a long time coming!), which takes pot-shots at ourselves. Making digs at labels of 'western', 'city-bred', 'funded feminists' and at the co-option of women's issues by political parties and the state; laughing at the confusions of collective functioning arising out of our allergy to domination; spoofing the organised Left as we satirise their fear of the 'L' word and address the marginalisation of lesbians – we do all this and more.

As a friend of Saheli once asked, "We all know what we are against, but do we know what we are for?" Yes, indeed, sister, we do. More often than not.



Meera Velayudhan has been involved in gender studies since its inception in the early 1980s in India. The focus of her research has been women's struggles and forms of organisation in varied historical contexts – both pre-independence and contemporary – with her more recent work focusing on Kerala. She has worked with the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), Delhi; the Gender Resource Centre (GRC), Ahmedabad; been on the organising committees of the

first and second national conferences of the Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS); and is a founding member of the Janwadi Mahila Samiti (AIDWA, Delhi unit).

Meera is currently involved in a research study of two craft communities in Kutch (Gujarat), looking at their use of local natural resources and the challenges of the market. She is also preparing a political biography of her mother, Dakshayani Velayudhan, the first dalit woman graduate in India, a member of the Cochin Legislative Council, the Constituent Assembly and first Parliament. Meera works as a policy analyst with the Centre for Environment & Social Concerns (CESC), Ahmedabad.

New Challenges, New Learnings, but Dreams Persist...

MEERA VELAYUDHAN

FROM where did I draw my sense of justice? Myriad thoughts and images come to my mind – different points of history, of locations and identities. Although born and brought up in Delhi, my identity is deeply linked with Mulavukad, a small island off the coast of Cochin where my mother, Dakshayani, lived, and Kocheril, in feudal Travancore, where my father, Velayudhan, grew up. As first-generation educated dalits their lives were also part of the history of their communities in the region – they became the changing face of the community. There were many firsts in my mother's life – the first girl to wear an upper cloth, the first dalit woman graduate in India, a science graduate, a member of the Cochin Legislative Council and of the Constituent Assembly. Many assertions were also made, of *not* walking with shoulders bent nor making way for upper castes when walking on the road. A staunch Gandhian, my mother stood by Babasaheb Ambedkar in the Constituent Assembly debates on key principles underlying India's Constitution.

My father was given the opportunity to study in his landlord's school, the same landlord who would beat him mercilessly for little things and later give him sweets. His mother worked in the landlord's household. My parents were

married at the Gandhi ashram in Wardha, with Gandhiji and Kasturba as witnesses and a leper standing in as a priest. Kasturba Gandhi also spun a white sari with a red border for my mother for the marriage ceremony. My father was among the first batch of masters students at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Bombay with labour welfare as his specialisation. His political life arose from the Indian National Congress and the state people's movement in Travancore, but soon after his election to the first parliament from the Indian National Congress, he joined hands with his friend, the socialist leader, Rammanohar Lohia, on various issues. My father won two parliamentary elections from the non-reserved constituency of Quilon in Kerala, the latter with the support of the Left. His experience of working with the people never left him even as he became deeply involved in the refugee rehabilitation committee of parliament. The stories of Partition are many, and sometimes families were put up for a short time in the outhouse of our bungalow, too. One of them was an army officer and his wife, waiting for a pension; there was the ruler of Nabha who sought my father's help with his privy purse; and there was a large Muslim household which lived in our home for a long period. Several cousins, both maternal and paternal, also stayed in our home, studying or working. It was my mother who introduced my first cousin, K.R. Narayanan (later, President of India, my father and his were brothers) to Jawaharlal Nehru after he returned from the London School of Economics, which led to his joining the Indian Foreign Service.

I was inspired by many of my father's "side activities" – taking a delegation of shoeshine boys to a bank for a loan, or pressing for insurance for circus artistes. Both my parents travelled abroad in parliamentary delegations, giving us, their children, a sense of the histories of the different countries, in particular of China and Vietnam, and of non-aligned leaders

like President Tito, Nasser, Chou en Lai, Ho Chi Minh, Sukarno and Nehru, all in our family's photo albums. It did not seem strange to me and my brothers that my parents belonged to different, if not opposing, political parties, yet they worked together. As the only daughter (I had four brothers) I was special for my parents, who sent me away to a boarding school to ensure that their social activities did not interrupt my schooling. My four brothers were not so privileged, they had to change schools many times. It was evident to me from childhood that I would have to make my own life. I think it must have been my father's influence because I always, in school too, considered myself a "political person". Both my parents encouraged me and my brothers to keep our eyes open to whatever was happening around us, to read, respond and express our opinions. However, my father passed away too early, in the mid-1970s. He was disappointed with the Left in Kerala – wrote a book, *Kerala, the Red Rain Land* – did not feel comfortable with any political formation and was increasingly moving towards Buddhism, personally and intellectually. Was he also disappointed with the Nehruvian ethos? Perhaps. As always, he was ahead of his times.

Cut off completely from her roots in Kerala and even as she worked as an officer in the Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) in Delhi to support the family, my mother, along with a few Ambedkarite middle class dalit women, initiated a national dalit women's forum, the Mahila Jagriti Parishad, by holding a conference in Delhi towards the end of the 1970s. I recall accompanying her and Kaushalya Baisantry (a participant in Babasaheb Ambedkar's women's meet in the 1940s in Maharashtra), visiting the houses of middle class dalits, mainly civil servants and professionals, to collect donations for the event. I was disturbed to see that the younger generation, the second generation of educated dalits, were either uninterested or embarrassed by this. However, the lively conference, with

over two hundred dalit women from different states participating, with their own stories, poems, speeches and songs, reflected their attempt to create a space of their own. I recall preparing write-ups, press notes, etc. Members of the organisation met each month but there was no decision taken on a future plan of action or levels of work among poor dalit women in Delhi. Frustrated at nothing working out concretely, my mother (President, MJP) and Kaushalya Baisantry (General Secretary, MJP) began work among women sweepers in Munirka (South Delhi) on basic literacy and looking for alternate employment skills-training. There was no question of looking for funds, my mother believing in the Gandhian ethic of voluntarism and building resources from within. After my mother passed away the MJP petered out, but I remember that there were more and more such efforts in the early Eighties, at organising dalit women's platforms in different states.

Looking back, I think my search for a wider canvas began then, although gender remained a constant as evident from my being one of the founding members of the Manushi women's collective. Soon, in fact after its first issue came out, most of us – Rukmini Rao, Sahba Husain, Indu Agnihotri and Urvashi Butalia – were out of Manushi, which was then registered as a Trust. Its editor, Dr. Vina Mazumdar, resigned, saying that she would stay on as editor only if we all stuck together. Although we had all put in a great deal of our time and effort – I think I wrote an article on dalit women in the inaugural issue, collected hundreds of subscriptions even before the first issue was published – it was evident that there would be major differences on the direction the magazine should take. There was also the question of whether different kinds and levels of expression would find a place in the journal, whether it would be a space for dialogue as well. I was happy to have been part of this initiative, but also to move on as I was entering the field of women's studies that was

emerging in the late 1970s–early 1980s. This was also when I joined the Left movement having become a member of the CPI(M) Delhi's local area (South Delhi) committee, a mainly working class unit. It was Suneet Chopra, a Kisan Sabha CPI(M) member active in UP, who is also an anthropologist, who initially drew me into a house-to-house campaign in South Delhi for elections to parliament; and he who introduced me to the CPI(M) Delhi state party secretary, the legendary Major Jaipal Singh. Very soon my membership followed.

It was my involvement with issues concerning women students at Jawaharlal Nehru University, sensitising the vibrant student movement within the campus to "women's issues", that drew me to the Left movement, although this was not my first experience of Left politics. I had earlier been part of a Trotskyist group on campus, in many ways an elitist group of very bright students led by Jairus Banaji, but which nevertheless exposed me to wider Left debates, and helped develop a critical mind, making my academic discipline of history more relevant. The Marxist debate on domestic labour had just begun at the international level and we also held some discussions at a theoretical level at JNU. More significantly, it was within this group that a kind of women's caucus was formed, with Geeta Ramakrishnan (now a leader in the construction workers' movement); Akhila Sivadas (now working on issues of women and media); Indira Jaising (senior advocate and now Additional Solicitor General); and myself, discussing both our personal situations as well as searching for a space of our own. We were not meant to be part of a small group. Rohini Banaji (Hensman), though not part of our small women's group, always had her own analysis of issues and expressed her views forcefully. Although we all moved on to work on different aspects of the women's and trade union movements, we shared a search for alternative ways of organising and of analysing issues. Was it not unusual then

that I found myself part of the traditional Left, the CPI(M) in Delhi? I do not think so. Perhaps I was looking for a more grounded platform.

Very soon after I joined the South Delhi local committee of the CPI(M) in the early 1980s, I was assigned to a women workers' struggle at Hindustan Computers Ltd. in Ghaziabad. The computer assembling began as a joint venture but as part of an attempt to privatise it, the management decided to relocate the unit to Gurgaon with workers 'rejoining' and signing new contracts. This led to a confrontation. Needless to say, I was completely new to this kind of work and had to find my way around. Since I was not aware that this was an area of militant trade union activity, I was not apprehensive. The women workers came mainly from Old Delhi, from destitute households that had moved to Delhi after Partition, and were the key earning members of their families. The management was adamant about signing new contracts. The workers struck work, but with great difficulty and the help of a male employee, we prevented the action from turning violent. This was followed by months of dharna, with the management determined to avoid a dialogue. In the meantime I looked up various bits of information about the unit itself, its balance sheet and accounts, and shared it with the women workers so that they were more informed about HCL – it was a profit-making unit. Some days the women workers would be very motivated, on other days feel quite disheartened. There was little support action, either. While the local Party unit had assigned this work to me, pressure began to build up at the state level to move out of this struggle and into the newly-set-up women's organisation, Janwadi Mahila Samiti. (One state leader even tried to convince me that computers had no future!) The struggle ended in a most unusual manner. By chance, I met the CITU union leader from Noida with whom I shared the information that the management was not willing

to have a dialogue. To my surprise he said he didn't know about the struggle but added, do not worry, they will come to the table. I later heard that the manager was accosted while he was on his way to Noida and a dialogue soon ensued. The women workers rejoined the unit at Gurgaon with fresh contracts but their salaries were protected.

It was when I joined the Party that the CPI(M) decided to set up its women's wing, the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) in the early 1980s. It had no unit in Delhi, however, so along with my friend from JNU, Indu Agnihotri (earlier with the Students' Federation of India – SFI), we would visit the Delhi state secretary of CPI(M) almost daily and impress upon him the need for a women's organisation. Women leaders within the CPI(M) in Delhi were less enthusiastic, with some of them unconvinced about the need for a separate organisation for women, even though a decision to do so had been taken officially.

The Janwadi Mahila Samiti (JMS) was launched with eleven core members, one of whom was deciding to work in the slums of Delhi, known as "resettlement colonies". It was a tough job since the Party itself did not exist in many of these areas; but in a way, it enabled the building up of a vibrant women's organisation made up of poor women, mainly dalit and backward caste, from the slums. Beginning with civic issues, including a Public Distribution System (PDS), civic facilities and price rise, very soon violence against women and, in particular, dowry violence, gained momentum. A legal support system evolved, focusing on legal redress and the police, which ensured a wider outreach among women. It wasn't long before middle class women began to approach JMS, but they had no sympathy with working class women or their issues. It was in this context that a central unit of JMS was formed, with myself as the nodal person. We were in the mid-1980s; several feminist groups had emerged in Delhi and

increasingly, they attempted to come together and dialogue on campaigns to amend the dowry law, the rape law and, later, the Muslim Women's Bill. These were politically charged, exciting times! Along with Indu Agnihotri I took part in discussions between Left women's groups like AIDWA, and feminist groups in Delhi, many of whose members were my personal friends. We spent hours and hours arguing, going back and forth, before drafting a common leaflet, and sometimes the group that undertook to print it would change or add a few sentences on what it thought should get across! The Left itself, but not me, was averse to the term "patriarchy" which was seen to be anti-men, rather than a system of power relations that was gendered.

Janwadi was basically an agitational organisation, more often than not courting arrest on the day-to-day issues of poor women, organising a mass collection of funds for events, and consequently gaining public visibility. So much so that once, when Indu Agnihotri and I were at a film, a journalist with a camera rushed towards us and said, "Are you having some action today?" However, I felt that as an organisation, we were mainly reacting to issues, whereas in the mid-1980s newer challenges were emerging, such as the Muslim Women's Bill or the Roop Kanwar 'sati' in Rajasthan, which did lead to some introspection. The combination of rebuilding caste identities along with commercialisation – as evident in the Deorala/Roop Kanwar case – the denial, for political reasons, of options for redressal for Muslim women; the many new forms and kinds of patriarchy that were coalescing, suggested that focusing on day-to-day issues of poor women alone was limited. A wider discussion and other levels of analysis were needed, requiring a reformulating of strategies. My insistence on "study groups" was perceived as my personal need, which it was, but it was also an attempt to find some space for putting across new debates to a Left women's leadership in

AIDWA, most of whom had wide experience in varied people's movements. At JMS, a dynamic review process evolved, making space for debate and dialogue, but at the Party level (and I was now a member of the Party unit of JMS), national and international issues received priority. Somewhere, there was a mismatch – the experiences of newer AIDWA units, such as in Delhi; the analysis emerging from field experiences; the exposure to newer debates, including feminist debates – these could not be taken to another level, particularly to the level of the Party organisation. These were the challenges before a Left women's movement. As I was quite marginal and a newcomer at the organisational level, I tried to find other spaces. As the first office secretary of AIDWA at the central level in Delhi, I worked with Susheela Gopalan, AIDWA General Secretary, a mass leader in her own right, more open to new thinking than many of her contemporaries. How did I put across my ideas? Through the position papers and campaign notes that we discussed and I helped to prepare, both for the Party and for AIDWA. It was a low-key role, needing a great deal of persistence and discretion. It was not easy, but was worth its while. The context was complex. I learnt a great deal about the diverse struggles of women in different parts of India and different generations of women leaders, as well as about organisational limitations, both at the Party level and at the level of AIDWA. There were other factors and actors at play, both in states where the Party was weak or small, as in Delhi, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and, to some extent, Tamil Nadu (where the Party had an older and stronger presence as well as a dynamic women's leadership, led by Maithily Shivaraman), where vibrant women's organisations emerged; whereas in the other states, where the democratic movement and the Party were stronger, it was difficult for a women's organisation to forge an identity of its own. Difficult to bring in new ideas or develop a kind of organisational autonomy for

AIDWA that could widen the spaces of democratisation as well as impact the political process more fundamentally. Personally, I spent a great deal of effort and time recording the oral testimonies of women leaders from many movements, including Telengana, Warli, and even Kalpana Dutta of the Chittagong uprising, to understand how women leaders emerged, how their roles changed over time, their own perceptions of this change, as well as to capture those moments that are not part of an organisation's history or analysis. I realised that I was also looking at levels of leadership in specific as well as comparative contexts. Was there space for newer women's leadership to emerge in varied state level organisations and movements? This remains my concern to date...

During the ten years I was with JMS I had consciously avoided an organisational position in it because such positions evolve through different levels of the Party. I think I was also too independent-minded to find such a place within it. Looking back, it made my conscience lighter as I did not feel compelled to take positions I was not convinced about. I was beginning to find my work monotonous, and increasingly felt the need for more personal space, as well as for diverse spaces for civil society to engage with formal political processes. This was particularly true after the Mandal Commission Report of 1990 and anti-reservation agitations, when the Left was forced to engage with the issue of caste, albeit reluctantly, I think. Fortunately, my plans for doing a PhD came through and I shifted to Coimbatore, south India. I was able to make the break, an emotionally charged moment since so many friendships are forged in a movement; but since the decision was my own, there was no bitterness involved and my friendships remain.

Alongside these experiences I had also been employed by the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) since

the early 1980s where my colleagues were people like Sahba Husain, Vidya Rao, Anil Choudhury and Balaji Pande, to mention a few. We tried to forge a link between women's studies and social movements, an attempt that was bound to be contentious within the Centre, although it was not obvious to me, initially. Undoubtedly, CWDS was the hub where research met policy and where women's struggles and research were interlinked. However, within CWDS, there were internal issues like recognition of work and standardisation of wages, as well as policy decisions such as donors deciding research design, which had to do with building alternate institutions outside the educational system. The informal nature of functioning within CWDS made any such dialogue difficult. It was not long before my contract was terminated. I had just got married! Many of my colleagues and friends left CWDS, one by one, in 1985. It was a huge let-down and very disappointing as I felt I had played a role in institution building, advocacy, and varied organisational activities for the Indian Association of Women's Studies which was located then at CWDS. (At the second IAWS conference in Trivandrum in 1984, I had not only contributed towards its coordination but had also put together the thematic session on women in popular movements.) I had joined CWDS which promised me the opportunity of doing a PhD in due course. Since there was little awareness within JMS about the significance of such institutions or even of women's studies, there was little support from that quarter when my contract ended. However, to my surprise, I received a call from veteran communist leader and politburo member, B.T. Ranadive, who wanted to know what had happened, what the issues involved were. His first concern was why "one of our own", as he put it, had been victimised. I didn't think that was an issue, so spoke instead about the significance of women's studies and of centres such as CWDS, where contests were inevitable. Determined not to be

marginalised within the few spaces that existed then for gender studies, I proceeded with my PhD in history, focusing on women's struggles in popular movements in Kerala. I needed time to reflect; and I thought it would be useful to engage in gender issues within an academic discipline. Of course, in the course of my work I found that gender studies is intrinsically interdisciplinary.

Having shifted to Coimbatore and completed my PhD, I was drawn to what is known as the 'autonomous women's movement', this time with the pre-Beijing processes (1995) initiated by a Coordination Unit set up for this purpose. I had established links with dalit women leaders in south India and here I was, interacting with and involved in discussions with so many, many groups and organisations, including dalit women's groups, in the south. What a change it was! Such a contrast to the 1980s when groups were engaged in unravelling the political nature of women's subordination in the private sphere, on the one hand; and where the new social movements focused on historical exclusions and subordination, on the other. In the pre-Beijing processes, these trends met; a new alliance politics was developing which pointed to the diverse and complex transformation strategies that prevailed.

It was obvious that special efforts had to be made to integrate dalit women's issues into the pre-Beijing process, and specific categories of women – dalit, adivasi, etc. – needed specific forums to discuss and articulate their concerns. It was in this context that the National Federation of Dalit Women was launched in 1995, prior to the Beijing Conference. I had helped prepare a theme paper for the National Federation of Dalit Women to be presented at the NGO conference at Huairou. Very few, only dalit, women, attended these sessions. It was very painful, as struggles on issues such as land, sexual violence, discrimination, and so on, were discussed through various media, including films. There was, however, one

meeting in an international forum of indigenous women which was more high profile, at which I was a panel member, speaking on dalit women's economic issues. I found myself choking emotionally, unable to speak. Here we were addressing an international gathering, whereas among the voices of women in our own country we were so marginal.

Post-Beijing, when the National Alliance of Women's Organisations was formed in India, Ruth Manorama, the Convenor of the National Federation of Dalit Women, became its first president. It was a recognition of dalit women's issues by the women's movement and marked the emergence of a new alliance politics and forms of negotiation with the public, in political spheres and with the state. Issues of diversity find a role in negotiations with the state, with a potential for a transformative inter-relationship between the women's movement and the dalit women's movement. However, what form did the transformational agendas within these movements take, even as they jointly expanded democratic content and spaces?

These were exhilarating meetings, to say the least, and I felt most comfortable among my own group, in a complex feeling of belonging where we shared a common identity as dalit women, but also held other identities of sub-castes, cultures, political orientation, and so on. Not everyone was new to me in this journey. There was Kumud Pawade, the writer (also professor of Sanskrit!) whom I first met when my mother organised the Mahila Jagriti Parishad in Delhi; Vimal Thorat, an academic working on dalit writings in Hindi literature; Rajni Tilak, whom I met in the early 1980s when she was organising anganwadi women workers in Delhi; Ruth Manorama, the leader of the National Federation of Dalit Women, who is like a sister to me. There was also the poet, Jyoti Lanjewar, who in her poem, "Caves", wrote: *Their inhuman atrocities have carved caves in the rock of my heart/ I have been silent*

all these years listening to the voices of right and wrong/ But now I will fan the flames of human rights/ a poem that captured the prevalent mood. The newer generation of dalit women – young professionals, articulate, creative, writing poems and stories – were invisible in the dalit literary and cultural movement. Representing the poorest of the poor, located in an institutionalised setting of caste, economic and political domination and violence; marginal, if not absent, in the radical dalit movement as well as the women's movement, there were many struggles waiting to be fought. These were also struggles for meaning. Be it the concept of violence, poverty, measuring poverty, work, or even the very concept of rights, new realities needed to be considered. However, it was the changing and contested notion of citizenship that was central to the Federation's politics at local, national and international levels, and it marked the dalit women's movement. The three levels of oppression, caste, class and gender, in their intersectionality, were structured and emerged as the underlying analysis; the identification of caste with discrimination based on race and descent led to the forging of new solidarities with women in particular across the nations of the South. At the same time, the Federation's engagements received added strength as part of NAWO. As Ruth Manorama put it, "The dalit women's movement, as represented by the Federation, showed that it could provide essence to the feminist discourse." Contesting dominant discourses, exclusions and systems of violence, the possibility of a new political imaginary existed.

There were some challenges that the Federation faced, organisationally. Its leadership was too informal, allowing limited scope for transformational engagements at the local level or for drawing in newer groups that were emerging. There was also a sense of frustration among leading members about their own role and their specific skills, all of which inform the "collective conscience"; the advocacy role, no

doubt pathbreaking, dominated other strategies and levels of transformation. Other forums have been launched by leading members of the Federation, responding perhaps to needs at local or regional levels; and maybe the Federation also needed to link up with feminist and other discourses outside NAWO.

My involvement with the Beijing process also led to my visiting Pakistan for the first time with Kalpana Kannabiran, to participate in a post-Beijing review, as well as to discuss the curriculum development of a new gender studies centre to be set up in Lahore by the feminist NGO, ASR. The post-Beijing review was, in fact, a conference attended by over eight hundred women from different regions of Pakistan, mainly rural. It had a most interesting format – panel members would speak and women from the audience would respond, leading to a rich dialogue. Also evident was the cultural form that struggles and resistance have taken in Pakistan, with Iqbal Bano's "Hum Dekhenge", sung earlier before a fifty thousand strong rally in 1985 in Lahore guaranteed to rouse every crowd, even though the poem had been banned by Zia ul Haq.

Even as I was mainly involved with the National Federation of Dalit Women, I attended a course in New York held by the women's studies centre of Minnesota University which included an exposure to the CEDAW lobbying process. In 1998 I was a participant in the Global Women's Leadership Training Institute at Rutgers University, New Jersey, which included twenty other women activists and leaders from different countries, and was led by Charlotte Bunch. For the first time, I was exposed to international processes on gender issues, including those at the UN. The Institute made a deep impression on my outlook as well as provided me with new skills in advocacy.

Thus, when I attended the Beijing Plus Five UN meeting in New York in 2000 as a member of the National Federation

of Dalit Women, I was disappointed with the lack of coordination among participants from India – we were left to ourselves to attend sessions, UN as well as NGO, but had no specific role as such. On the other hand, we received briefings every evening from a women's lobbying group consisting of young as well as older activists, on the UN proceedings. This was a conscious effort, and the dynamism in the process made me wonder what I was doing, merely attending sessions of my own choice.

Once again, my shifting to Kutch from south India enabled me to rethink my own involvement in different organisations. During 1998 and upto 2000, I was part of a South Asia research project, "Re-imagining the State: Gender and Governance in South Asia," coordinated by Radhika Coomaraswamy of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) in Sri Lanka. Radhika was also the UN's Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women. As part of a three-state study team (Kalpana Kannabiran, S. Anandhi and myself), I conducted a study on the theme of gender and the democratic process in Kerala, focusing on elected women members' perceptions of state, gender, violence and politics. Just as the study was completed, a severe earthquake in Kutch in 2001 forced me and my family to relocate to Vadodara for a year. While packing to return to Kutch the following year, the Gujarat violence of 2002 broke out. I was invited to be a part of the eight-member (Sri Lanka, Algeria/France, India, Israel/UK, Germany, USA) International Initiative for Justice in Gujarat – a response from national and international women's groups to the murder, arson, rape and looting of February-March 2002 in the state. The other panel members included Nira Yuval-Davis, Rhonda Copelon, Sunila Abeysekera, Anisa Helie, Gabriela Mischkowski, Vahida Nainar, Uma Chakravarti and Farah Naqvi. We visited areas in and around Ahmedabad, Vadodara and Panchmahals during December 14-17, 2002,

meeting the survivors of violence and members of women's, human rights and citizens' groups in Gujarat. Of the three Indian members, I was the only one located in Gujarat. Despite the displacement (shifting to Vadodara) owing to the earthquake and communal violence in the midst of shifting back to Kutch, I was able to play a role through this panel, although it was in the midst of a few years of isolation for me. The visits with a group from the panel, which included Nira Yuval-Davis, to the violence-affected areas around Vadodara and Anand shook me, and all of us, to the core. As stated in the Report, each of us felt that the 2002 violence marked a definitive moment in our own relationship with our past and present. These included memories of Nazi terror; conflict-ridden Israel and Palestine; civil society facing Muslim fundamentalism in Algeria; war crimes in Bosnia; ethnic chauvinism and protracted civil strife in Sri Lanka; the trauma of Partition and the anti-Sikh violence of 1984 in India; and the growth of right wing parties and their coming to power in the 1990s, appealing to a homogenised Hindu identity. According to Rhonda, sexual violence was an engine of the mobilisation of hatred and destruction in Gujarat. Nira Yuval-Davis saw in the testimonies of women the gendered and sexual dimensions of nationalism and racism that she had been studying and writing about for years. My own response was: many doubts arise in my mind (about the erosion of citizenship), particularly when one comes face to face with women who have faced mass rape and brutalities. For the first time married women broke their silence on the sexual attacks they suffered. A mother spoke of her two daughters, but did not say that she herself was a victim. Testimonies were given, sometimes with young babies looking on, and punctuated by long silences. None of us could sleep that night. A community was being held to ransom – accept your secondary citizenship or... We exchanged experiences of Palestine, Bosnia, Israel,

but the extent and varied forms of brutality in Gujarat were stunning. According to Gabriela, the cruelty one hears always surpasses the listener's comprehension. It illustrates the difficulties of bridging the gap between political analysis and a general engagement with gender justice, and the overwhelming plight of individual survivors of mass violence, in particular, sexual violence. As a dalit I felt, how could members of one marginalised community attack another? What was the context that made an oppressed caste find strength and identity with their own oppressors to assault another marginalised community? That the ground had been prepared, surely and steadily, was known. However much we may intellectualise, nothing prepared us for what we saw and heard.

As I was the only panel member living in Gujarat, I needed to think about my future role once we had prepared our report. Struggle was the only way forward. Gujarat was (and remains) a real challenge. Everyone was new to me – civil society organisations, mainly NGOs, issue-based platforms, women activists, and the forms and levels of engagement which combined with 'development' work. Initially, I joined as a policy analyst with Gender Resource Centre (GRC), Ahmedabad, an autonomous organisation supported by UNFPA. A state-level gender policy (the Gender Equity Policy) draft, a civil society and Gujarat state government initiative, was in the process of being placed before the chief minister and his cabinet. Responding to clarifications sought by secretaries of various government departments and also rewording some sections so that the draft was acceptable, but without changing its substance, these were some of my tasks at GRC. Developing frameworks for a gender audit of government programmes, policy analysis – the possibilities were many. However, in reality, too much time was spent pushing files, and the scope for such work also depended on how responsive individual

civil servants were; there were issues of transparency, of how public funds would be spent. I could not continue with this. I soon joined a civil society organisation, UTTHAN (Ahmedabad), as an analyst and began to coordinate what is known as a "peace programme" in three districts – tribal Dahod/Panchmahal, coastal Amreli and Bhavnagar. In effect, it meant that the work directly involved rural areas affected by the 2002 communal violence, as well as those where violence did not occur but where deep fissures developed among people of different communities, in Bhavnagar and Amreli. It was a very difficult task and I could, and did, draw from my earlier experiences of grassroots work, analysing levels of conflict, addressing issues of identity and diversity and, in the process, developing a clearer picture of what role I could play, and at what level, in Gujarat.

It seemed that life had come full circle. However, in reality, one draws from the past while responding to newer challenges, and even as one becomes more comfortable with one's own self, there is always something new to learn, to achieve, to dream. The struggle continues...



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Roshmi has two children, one daughter-in-law and several dogs. Her children, her dogs, a host of friends across countries, and her passion for music occupy her personal life.

Spirited and On Course

ROSHMI GOSWAMI

"YOU are a newcomer," is what my heavyweight feminist friends would say to me, pulling my leg! Well, they were right because I am a rather late entrant, a latecomer as it were, into the Indian women's movement. Arrived late, but promptly felt comfortable – more comfortable perhaps in the South Asian women's movement to which I attached myself. As I retrospect, I realise that the ease with which I slipped into this feminist space is because I finally found kindred souls who not only said that one could be free-spirited but also that it is great to be so! This is something I have always been, but it was never quite endorsed or approved of by the people in my life or the situations I found myself in.

Born in the oil town of Digboi, my childhood was spent amidst the tranquil and shimmering beauty of a tiny tea plantation, Khatangpani, in the north-eastern tip of Upper Assam, surrounded by miles and miles of reserve forests. However, that beauty was, and is, deceptive. Verdant abundance on the one hand, deep resentment and simmering discontent on the other. Colonial stronghold at one time, with the convergence of tea, oil and coal industries, accompanied by Raj styles of doing business with gentlemanly flair, and an ULFA stronghold thereafter. I grew up, therefore, in an unreal but advantageously unrestrictive social environment – very colonial but also very indigenous or tribal, as the local milieu

consisted of a wide cross-section of ethnic minorities removed both by distance and ethos from mainstream Assamese culture, social norms and restrictions.

Home was also fairly unrestrictive. I grew up with three siblings, two sisters and a brother. Our father doted on us and indulged us totally, our mother tried to discipline us. I rebelled and often got into hot water but it was she who saw to it that we went to boarding school for a convent education. She wanted for us what she never had. Left to my father we might have ended up roaming the jungles as 'free spirits', learning the 'wisdom' of the forests but with just a smattering of formal education by the local 'master babu'.

As a child I was painfully shy, tongue-tied and ill at ease in the colonial tea highlife. Unlike my sisters, I hated going to the Planters' Club (except during Christmas when I got my annual gift from Santa), hated the stiff and scratchy can-cans that I had to wear to parties, was not a favourite with any of the aunties, as I was unresponsive and appeared to be petulant and plain old stubborn. But there were compensations. Long beautiful walks, unrestricted movement in acres of lush green country, totally safe and secure, long lazy Sundays with the family on the banks of the numerous gushing rivers of Upper Assam, drives through elephant country, listening to the calls of the hoolock gibbon. Some of my best childhood memories are of times spent with my nanny, a gentle, loving and frail old Gond woman whose neck and ankles were adorned with the most exquisite silver jewellery I have ever seen. I would often sneak off to the 'labour line', to her squeaky clean mud house to watch her cook or help her scrub her bell-metal pots and pans with ash and green grass till they shone and I could see my face in them. I would wait for my parents' weekly trips to the Digboi Club Night with great anticipation. The moment they were out of sight I would dash off to one particular spot of the little stream that flowed right through the plantation.

Here all the children from the 'labour line' came to take a dip in the stream which swelled into a gushing river during the monsoons. I loved watching them dive into the water with total abandon and longed to join in. But there were issues of impropriety here. Children of the management do not mingle with the 'working class'. With parents safely out of the way, club nights would be my splash-and-dive with the rest of the children. Other special memories are of hanging out with my nanny in her little courtyard, sipping salted black tea out of bell-metal bowls in contemplative companionship with others from her 'line', listening to the day's gossip and to stories of their lives. These stories would often include information about leaking roofs in their homes, insufficient 'rations', lack of medical provisions, and so on. I would arbitrate on their behalf and carry the stories back to my father and, much as I loved him, challenge him with their complaints. I didn't always get his attention but I promised my nanny that, one day, I would set things right.

But I had to leave these idyllic settings in order to get educated. So, one fine day, at the age of seven, I accompanied my older sister to Dibrugarh to the Little Flower School, a convent run by the Salesian order. I was totally miserable in my first year and, though I made many very good friends over the years, I never got over that sinking, anxious going-to-boarding feeling. I experience it even today just as I am about to leave home and board a flight or when one of my children leaves home. In the world of the Catholic nuns all my freedom evaporated. The restrictions were varied and weird – silence during meals (one girl would be appointed to read about the virtues of Laura Vicuna or Dominic Savio and we were meant to listen and learn from these saintly beings while we ate!); waking up at some unearthly hour to attend church service, kneeling down; no leaving the dining hall without finishing every morsel of the unpalatable food; no showing bare arms;

no pictures of Hindu gods or voluptuous apsaras on the toffee tins which, in those days, served as our pencil boxes! The burden of sin sat heavily on us at all times. My older sister had her rebellious moments and temper tantrums, but generally conformed to the requirements; I, however, attached myself to the 'rebel gang' led by some senior girls who challenged many of these meaningless impositions. As the restrictions increased, my tongue loosened. No longer the shy, diffident and fearful-of-people person, I was fast becoming a tough cookie!

My high school was in stark contrast to the first. Started in the late 1800s by the British for the education of officers' daughters, Pine Mount exuded a sense of freedom. The school had some amazing teachers, the most impressive being Queenie Rynjah. Under her leadership Pine Mount encouraged us to be strong, honest, humane and self-assured. From waking up at the crack of dawn to attend church services I was now ready at the crack of dawn for hockey coaching by the headmistress herself. Much of the foundation of my feminist politics in later years was laid by the influences of this period.

I was barely out of school when I met my husband, fell in love and got married. My parents were terribly disappointed as I gave up the possibility of a career in the medical profession. I was able to continue with college and university, though, due primarily to great support from my mother-in-law, an amazingly progressive and generous person. Marriage was difficult. We both sought different things, had different priorities and different aspirations. The only thing we had in common was our crazy love for dogs! In hindsight, I think the biggest difference was that my husband's family was deeply patriarchal in a way that mine never was; over the years, as my own understanding and feminist politics sharpened, it became more and more difficult to continue making compromises. In sharp contrast to the void in my marriage, the arrival of my two children, Varun and Tara, was and continues to be the most

fulfilling and joyful experience of my life. I wasn't the conventional mother. When I see others investing so much effort into mothering, making sure their children avail of every opportunity to acquire skills and get better educated, I wonder if I wasn't a bit too casual. Be that as it may, Varun and Tara's childhood was one big picnic for me and they have turned out to be deeply caring, sensitive, balanced and wise, rather than clever! As they grew up, the lack of companionship in my marriage was more than made up for by the warm and easy friendship that we shared, and the gradual reversal of roles as they took over aspects of my life that I have no expertise or inclination to deal with. Today they are the greatest support and anchor in my life, the two with whom I discuss my work, my frustrations, my fears, my dreams, and they have the last word on any major decisions that need to be taken.

I don't know what changed my life or the precise moment at which that happened, but the mobilisation for the UN Women's Conference in Beijing that started in 1993 was certainly one that brought about a permanent change and clear direction in my life. Monisha Behal (Ben) roped me into the Tezpur District Mahila Samiti's (TDMS) efforts to document issues and carry the voices of women from north-east India into national and international forums. The Beijing process was an unprecedented phenomenon, fraught with complexities and difficult dynamics, but one that held much excitement, hope and passion. To be honest, my initial engagement was driven largely by my loyalty to a north-east identity and the need to pay attention to the issues and politics of the 'peripheries' rather than of women, *per se*. I was already quite embroiled in the north-east identity question, having supported the Assam agitation with great enthusiasm. The fact that its tough young leader, Bhriugu Phukan, was my husband's cousin also brought many of these discussions and realities into our

home. I aligned myself with the Naga Students' Union during my days at the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) in Shillong. Two of the top Naga student leaders, who were highly respected, became my friends and I learnt a lot from them, much of which helped shape my work and understanding, years later. To everybody's great disappointment one of them turned into a corrupt but powerful politician, but the other remained committed to his ideology and pursued it through his legal profession. In those days NEHU was a hotbed of politics. Faculty members, specifically in the social sciences, were mostly at loggerheads with one another, and used regional identity politics for personal advancement as and when it suited them. One may argue that this is common in any academic setting, but in a central university situated in a region embroiled in armed conflict and ethnic divisions, this has surely been particularly negative. It was very disturbing to see 'tribal' students being used as trump cards to secure advancement, with no effort made or genuine commitment to pre-empting ethnic conflict. Towards the end of my doctorate, willy-nilly, I took up a job as a lecturer in philosophy. I was a fairly good teacher, but my heart was not in it. I realised I couldn't continue in this half-hearted manner, and quit my job when I got a research fellowship at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla. This was an interesting and decisive period in my life – I concluded that academia was not for me. I wanted to make change happen rather than be involved in pontificating about it. I headed home and, together with some friends, started an organisation called CACTUS; we began working with artisans, specifically with loin-loom or backstrap women weavers, and gradually got drawn into their lives and the multiple identities that they negotiated as they eked out their livelihoods.

At some point during the Beijing mobilisation, Ben distanced herself from the chaotic Beijing madness,

concentrating on practical grassroots action; TDMS was weighed down by internal contradictions, and I was left to keep the north-east regional flag flying high! But there were so many other comrades on that journey – Sunita Dhar and Sumita Ghose from the co-ordination unit set up for Beijing, and Pramada Menon were constant allies, as were members of the National NGO Advisory Committee (of which I was also a member), the most dynamic being Vasanth Kannabiran and Ruth Manorama. Many other powerful and impressive women came into my life at this time and have remained in it, with their politics, vision, expertise and personal companionship – Shanthi Dairiam, Sunila Abeysekera and Kamla Bhasin.

I travelled extensively across the north-east, drawing women from the most marginalised sections into the process, but also trying to capture their strength and dynamism in a region of political strife and protracted conflict. I aligned closely with the Meira Paibis, the torch-bearers of Manipur, who were just beginning to move from community policing on alcoholism to raising issues of human rights violations. A trip to Imphal always meant a meal with these amazingly powerful women at their home in the Palace Gate Compound. Chaobi Devi, Thokchom Ramani and Kunjalata Devi were an inseparable trio who drew strength from each other and attended every meeting together, regardless of who was invited. But in Beijing the vivacious Chaobi withered into a disempowered old woman in an unfamiliar setting, without the strength of her buddies and her support base. It was very sad to see her like that and it taught me some important lessons about what not to do when working with community women. There are so many happier and more inspiring memories about Beijing – but they would require a Beijing memoir by themselves! One that remains etched in my mind, however, is of Kamla Bhasin, who had reached China before us and was waiting to receive the two-hundred-and-fifty-odd

women from India at the immigration line with her famous *Tod tod ke bandhano* song-and-dance number. All of us, travel weary and dishevelled, greeted her with equal gusto and the deadpan, humourless Chinese authorities were overpowered by infectious feminist exuberance!

At the time, the ethnic conflict between Nagas and Kukis was at its height and reports kept coming in of brutal killings and massacres between them. Each side wanted their stories and documents to be carried to an international forum, and I had to make very sure that I did not fall prey to prejudices and personal biases but remained focused and committed to issues of gender justice. I was completely taken aback therefore when a highly respected human rights activist and well-known torch-bearer for the region presented a highly one-sided account at Beijing. I was particularly disturbed, too, by *how* it was presented. While I have no issues with what people wear, I do question why indigenous women can only be seen and heard when they present themselves in feathers and beads, in forums of the 'others'. Dance troupes are fine but why, in political forums, should the only roles for indigenous women be to sing, recite inconsequential verse or just look exotic while others – or men – do the talking? I objected to what I thought was a lack of a woman-centric, gender-just presentation and, as expected, got into a serious controversy. I obviously had much to learn. I organised a workshop in Huairou on women and armed conflict, conceptualised with Sunila Abeysekera and facilitated by her. It was markedly different, as it sought to highlight and analyse the precarious and often extremely vulnerable positions women find themselves in in situations of conflict, caught between state and non-state violations, balancing community versus individual rights, at the same time committed to the larger political struggle for justice. I knew for sure that this was the route to take and this the person I would work with in future. She had sensitivity

and balance, combined with a sharp feminist and political analysis which I found tremendously inspiring.

The most significant aspect of the Beijing process for us was the tremendous flow of information to and from the region. There was a great sense of participation among grassroots women who were highly appreciative of the fact that, for the first time, they had information about what was happening elsewhere in the country, and the rest of the country had information about their issues. The North-East Network (NEN) which Ben and I started grew out of this process. Having brought together women caught up in different ethnic conflicts, made inroads into remote and inaccessible areas and surfaced difficult and contentious issues, it was important that we committed ourselves to addressing them in a sustained way – NEN was that commitment. We divided up our work; Ben took on organisational capacity-building and development issues, sorely needed in the region, while I focused on women's human rights, armed conflict and the dynamics and politics of gender justice and peace processes. Part of my living room became NEN's office, which made things very challenging in my personal life with an already difficult and contentious marriage.

How did we chart our course for the future? Initially, as we struggled with the direction our activism would take, we decided that the palpable needs of the women – livelihood, health, safe drinking water – needed to be addressed immediately. The question of rights would come later or could be handled by others who were already in the field, like major human rights groups. Almost imperceptibly, however, this began to change pretty soon, and the shift in our thinking and strategy from needs to rights was now articulated consciously and clearly. As we organised meetings and workshops and sent off recommendations to the government, stories of violence against women by both state and non-state actors

continued to pour in. If there were ethnic clashes, it was women and children who were rounded up and hacked by rival groups; if there were army operations, it was women again who were the targets. Yet, despite everything, it was the same women who continued to provide shelter, who were the keepers of faith and community values.

We listened to women talking about their desire to negotiate for peace. We listened to their stories about increasing domestic violence, their concerns about health and about the environment, about the complete collapse of infrastructure due to the ongoing strife. It became increasingly clear that our activism needed to be anchored in something that was non-negotiable. We had to address issues of violence not from a victimised position but from the more positive, pro-active questioning of the structural reasons for it. For this we needed to shift not only from the language of needs to the language of rights, but to the language of women's *human* rights, defined by their own needs and experiences. Due to the protracted conflict in the region there was already much human rights activism on the ground and great concern regarding state violations against women. However, there was a lack of both understanding and effort to see the link between these violations and deep-rooted, structural discrimination against women. The fragility of the gender commitment was even more apparent in negotiations on 'peace deals' and peace packages.

November 1997 marked a turning point in NEN's activism. We organised a five-day workshop in Shillong, "Women's Rights are Human Rights," in collaboration with the International Women's Rights Action Watch – Asia-Pacific, whose primary objective was to add a gender perspective to human rights activism in north-east India. But after this initial intervention, which was like sowing a little seed, we refrained from plunging headlong into human rights activism. We had

raised very tricky and sensitive issues which women had to digest and reflect on. We used versions of the debates in our own work at the grassroots level and kept up our interaction with, and capacity-building of, women leaders, waiting to see if they took the initiative. Very slowly but surely, they did. From amongst the NEN team, Darilyn Syiem was a constant companion on these journeys. She was a great resource and extremely skilful at using examples from the Bible to convince women and drive home a point.

This workshop had taken place against the backdrop of a particularly difficult, contentious and tragic moment in time. The well-known social activist, Sanjoy Ghose, who had moved from Urmul in Rajasthan to start work in Majuli – the largest freshwater island in the middle of the Brahmaputra – was abducted and possibly killed by the ULFA in July of the same year. While the family grappled with the tragedy, this incident led to various reactions by different people and organisations. The MacArthur Foundation cancelled its proposed fellows' meeting, scheduled to be held in Shillong, and subsequently also decided not to support any fellows from the region. Many people cancelled earlier commitments or politely declined to come in as resource persons for our meetings and training workshops. Nothing was explicitly stated, but there was an underlying current of distrust, a perception that we did not take a strong enough position against ULFA. Shanthi and Sunila's support at that critical juncture, therefore, and the theme and objective of the workshop were of particular significance for us. Two other persons who stood by us were Kamla Bhasin, and Aleyamma Vijayan from Trivandrum. Kamla continued to conduct gender workshops with different categories of people, including church elders and pastors, Aleyamma facilitated workshops on sensitive issues like reproductive rights and sexuality among the deeply religious Christian communities of the region.

And so NEN became part of a South Asian women's human rights monitoring and facilitating network that based its work on the CEDAW framework. Using CEDAW was extremely useful for us. In a strife-torn region, anything that was 'national' was often viewed with suspicion by non-state actors, especially if it dealt with rights issues. International human rights instruments and treaties, on the other hand, had great legitimacy as many of the movements for self-determination consistently engaged with these processes. As CEDAW was a ratified treaty, what we did was to try to facilitate the implementation of its commitments. We interpreted and analysed CEDAW articles in terms of the local context, and were able to surface different kinds of rights violations and pin down state accountability. The substance and framework of CEDAW also enabled us to emphasise that individual dignity and self-respect must necessarily be the non-negotiable first premise of any kind of human rights activism. We used different articles of the Convention, finding Article 5(a) particularly useful; by analysing and interpreting it we were able to show how it strikes at the very basis of unequal power relations, starting from the public and entering the very private domains of bedroom and kitchen.

While the Beijing process had thrown up issues directly, this process exposed layers and layers of very complicated and often risky dynamics. Because we were examining violations against women by both state and non-state actors and by all sections and ethnic groups, one militant group proposed that a smear campaign be launched against us. The Bodo/aboriginal conflict in Lower Assam was at its peak at that time, with over two lakh people in refugee camps and widespread atrocities against women. We had already organised a meeting with a wide cross-section of people to share the objectives of our baseline study. Serious objections were raised by a well-known woman leader, the sister of a leader

of one of the militant groups, at our attempt to look at violations by both sides. She insisted that any visit to the area must have their approval. I travelled to the area without her 'approval', visited the camps, interviewed various people (including the beautiful young wife of a militant leader who firmly endorsed her husband's use of violence for the 'cause'). The fact that we were not backed by academics and intellectuals, by major male-led human rights groups or by the media made us particularly vulnerable. Lack of institutional support, though, was more than compensated for by support from individuals, each bringing in an incredible network of friends and contacts. It is impossible to mention everyone, but I would like to place on record the solid wall of support that I had in Indranee Dutta (Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development); Grace Shatshang and Gina Shankham (Naga Women's Union of Manipur); Professor Amar Yumnam (Manipur University); and Amrit Goldsmith (CASA); apart from a whole host of personal friends from school and university. From the NEN team, Rubi Gogoi was an intrepid contributor to this work, fearless about travelling to the remotest and most contested areas for field work. Once again I travelled across the region, this time to conflict-affected areas, and listened to so many stories and accounts, all of which helped to shape my understanding and analysis. I remember travelling back to Upper Assam, to the areas I grew up in, to discover localities in Digboi that I never knew existed. In that non-colonial part of Digboi every household had at least one family member who had taken to militancy at some point or other. During this period, too, in an amazing twist of fate, I was reconnected to what I had rejected as a child – the Church! As I travelled in the interiors, the most welcoming, secure and protected places to stay in were Catholic missions. A different kind of relationship and mutual respect developed now with people of the faith, and

the largest peace rally I have ever addressed was organised by different missions and dioceses coming together in Guwahati, in 1996.

Tackling the marginalisation of women's rights was our agenda. This entailed entering the very private area of the family and of questioning the impact of the resurgence of ethnicity on reproductive choices and rights. We were aware of internal pressures on women to promote the interests of clan or community, and therefore had to ensure that they did not become even more vulnerable while claiming their rights. I organised what purportedly were CEDAW workshops, designed somewhat subversively to surface women's contribution to community identity, their role in maintaining the cohesiveness of the community during periods of conflict, and only then questioning their status and rights. Sunila's constant guidance, nuanced analysis and insights from the Sri Lankan context were invaluable in structuring our workshops. I remember conducting one particular workshop in Ukhrul district in a community hall which overlooked Somdal village, NSCN-IM (Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim-Isak Muivah) leader, Muivah's ancestral home, in the distance. As animated discussions on a feminist analysis of self-determination and peace-building continued late into the evening, community leaders sent in some of their trusted women to find out what was going on; the new arrivals endorsed what was being discussed and promptly contributed their own insights! I realised then that when women are on home ground, they are less guarded about expressing themselves and their views on gender discrimination. The same women in a meeting in Delhi would be fiercely loyal to their ethnic identity and the 'honour' of the tribe. I also realised that women, trapped in armed conflict by questions of identity and community values, prioritise different issues at different times, driven largely by the political climate of the moment. I had to learn to work

around these contradictions and challenges, and that in itself was an infinitely frustrating struggle.

This frustration came to a head in June 2001 when the Government of India decided to extend the cease-fire agreement it had with the NSCN-IM to all Naga-inhabited areas. The Meiteis rose in violent protest against the government and burnt down government buildings and offices. There was no direct confrontation between the two communities, but we were told that the Nagas were moving out of Imphal and the Manipur valley. We tried hard to negotiate between the two sides and prevent this exodus, but our Naga friends and colleagues said the order from the high command was to move, and there was no questioning that. Much has been written about the mass displacement of this period, but this and visits to relief camps in and around Senapati subsequently convinced me that the exodus was intentional and well co-ordinated, a political statement more than anything else. What was depressing, though, was that in the relief camps our women's rights colleagues promptly got busy collectivising the women into 'identity defining' traditional roles.

However, several positive moves were also made during this period. Demands were made to change traditional political institutions and modify gender-insensitive customary practices and laws; women were drawn into peace negotiations; armed conflict-related trauma and crisis centres were called for, and women came out strongly against violence. Although one cannot take the credit for these changes, I can confidently say that we were instrumental in bringing about a major shift in the gender and human rights perspectives of many of the women involved in these processes.

Work in and with NEN was also deeply rewarding and, above all, a very happy experience – for me the NEN team, especially in Shillong, was my extended family. Field trips to

the villages were particularly exciting. I remember time spent in Kynmynsaw village in Meghalaya with Darilyn, Vincent and Monica – bonding with the non-Hindi-speaking villagers, singing Bollywood songs till the wee hours of the morning, balancing ourselves on six-inch wide benches which served as our beds, and racing to the cascading waterfalls for our morning wash. Ben's great sense of humour and quaint eccentricities added to our lightheartedness! Whether we were trying to decipher garbled speeches delivered by enthusiastic local village heads or wondering whether the AK 47 armed militants in the back of the car would let us off, take us hostage or kick us out and hijack the car – we focused on the lighter side of things and this helped us through difficult and stressful periods.

In late 2001 I moved to Delhi as Program Officer in the Ford Foundation. I needed to move out of the organisation I had started to make room for a second rung, fresher and more vibrant leadership to take over. By then NEN already had dynamic young leaders, notable among them being Anurita Pathak and Farida Warjri. Then, work on women and conflict was getting increasingly frustrating; it was extremely lonely being a feminist human rights defender in the region and my personal life – marriage and romance – was in shambles. I joined the Foundation reluctantly, having left things to destiny, almost wishing that destiny had decided otherwise. I wondered whether I would be able to complete my three-year contract. I actually stayed on for eight long years! Seven of those were exceptionally enriching and exciting. I met some of the finest people I have ever known, worked in a space that was respectful, enabling and encouraging, and met kindred women's rights activists – Gaby Ore, Jael Silliman, Denise Dora and Willy Mutunga, to name a few. Personally, the job gave me economic security and a level of self-assurance I did not have earlier. The fact that I became part of the Foundation's human rights unit contributed largely to my positive experience.

Colleagues in that unit were political and strongly committed to ideology. Jael and I collaborated extensively on supporting women's rights and I was able to move important women's human rights organisations out of project support and into getting institutional support, which enabled them to address issues as and when required without being tied to particular activities. I was also able to position reproductive and sexual rights in a larger women's rights framework. Of course, there was criticism, but the criticism came from the rather insular, largely donor-funded-and-created sexuality and reproductive health lobby, not from feminist and human rights activists. Unfortunately, the gains made changed drastically in my last year at the Foundation, with a change of leadership both at headquarters as well as in the India office. The insidious way in which changes were carried out at the India level was especially revealing about how patriarchy works, and how threatening a feminist agenda can be!

When I first interviewed for the position at Ford I was cautioned by the representative that, as a grant-maker, I could not be an activist and take positions. Could I deal with that? I thought then, so what if I cannot take positions, I can fund those who will. I don't know if I have achieved anything really worthwhile, but at the end of the day all I can say is that my satisfaction lies in the fact that I have stayed the course – donor or activist, I remain ideology-driven. Today, I feel privileged and excited about being part of the angst as well as the jubilation behind the creation and birth of a new UN gender entity, and as UN Women becomes a reality with a strong, politically committed and highly respected leader as its head, I feel a great sense of satisfaction and a vindication of past struggles for women's rights, both as an activist and as a funder.



Vandana Shiva is a world-renowned environmental thinker and activist. A leader in the International Forum on Globalisation (IFG) along with Ralph Nader and Jeremy Rifkin, and of the Slow Food movement, Shiva was awarded the Alternative Nobel Prize (the Right Livelihood Award) in 1993, and the prestigious Sydney Peace Prize in 2010.

Director of Navdanya and of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Natural Resource Policy, and a tireless crusader for farmers', peasants'

and women's rights, she is the author and editor of a score of influential books. These include *Soil Not Oil*, *Manifestos on the Future of Food & Seed*, *Globalization's New Wars: Seed, Water & Life Forms*, *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution and Profit*, *Protect or Plunder? Understanding Intellectual Property Rights*, *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply*, *Monocultures of the Mind*, *The Violence of the Green Revolution*, and her path-breaking *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development in India*. Before becoming an activist, Vandana was one of India's leading theoretical physicists.

The Forest, the Farm and Feminine Power

VANDANA SHIVA

I was born in the Doon valley in 1952, to a father who had become forest conservator after leaving the army, and a mother who had become a farmer after leaving a senior government job in education. My parents had met during the war, and when my father proposed to my mother she agreed to marry him if he eventually left the army, and if she could continue to work. They also decided to give up their caste name as part of the anti-caste movement which was a very significant part of our independence struggle, and adopted the caste-neutral Shiva. Mother was posted in what became Pakistan after the tragic partition of India in 1947; she survived miraculously, but she had become a refugee. Refugees of the Partition were rehabilitated – shopkeepers got shops, employees got jobs, farmers got land. Instead of taking up a government job equivalent to what she had lost, my mother decided to get rehabilitated as a farmer.

I was born five years after Partition, and my childhood was shaped by the forests in the Himalaya where my father was posted, and by my mother's farm in the foothills. Nature was my first inspiration – and the study of nature my first passion – which is how I ended up becoming a physicist.

My most intimate memories of childhood are the sights

and sounds, tastes and smells of the Himalayan forests where I grew up, they became my physical and intellectual cradle. I feel a deep umbilical connection to forests of rhododendron, oak and deodar, and to mountain streams. We lived in Chakrata when I was born and moved later to Nainital, Pithoragarh, Tehri, Uttarkashi and Dehradun, which my parents decided to make their home. Today, these Himalayan regions are an independent state called Uttarakhand (the mountain state).

The British had annexed several Himalayan districts in 1815, mainly to exploit their forest wealth. Pine (called chir locally) was felled on a large scale to make 'sleepers' for railway lines. The entire catchment of the river Ganges falls in my region; in the Garhwal Himalaya, an Englishman, Mr. Wilson, obtained a lease in 1850 to exploit all the forests of the Bhagirathi valley for a low annual rental of Rs. 400. Under his axe several valuable deodar and chir forests were clear-felled and completely destroyed. In 1864, inspired by Mr. Wilson's flourishing timber business, the British rulers of the north-western provinces obtained a lease for twenty years and engaged Wilson to exploit these forests, as well, for them. European settlements, such as Mussoorie, created new pressures for the cultivation of food crops, leading to a large-scale felling of oak forests. Inspired by the economic success of Mr. Wilson and the government, the Tehri state took over the management of forests in 1895. Between 1897 and 1899, forest areas were reserved and restrictions were imposed on village use; these restrictions were resented and completely disregarded by the villagers, and led to incidents of organised resistance against the authorities. On March 31, 1905, a Durbar Circular (No. 11) from the Tehri king announced modifications to these restrictions in response to the resistance.

The contradictions between people's basic needs and the state's revenue requirements, however, remained unresolved, and in due course these contradictions intensified. In 1930

the people of Garhwal launched the non-cooperation movement to draw attention to the issue of forest resources; forest satyagrahas to resist oppressive forest laws were most intense in the Rawain region. The king of Tehri was in Europe at that time; in his absence, Dewan Chakradhar Jayal resorted to armed intervention to crush a peaceful satyagraha at Tilari. A large number of unarmed satyagrahis were killed and wounded, while others lost their lives in a desperate attempt to cross the rapids of the Yamuna river. Years later, the martyrs of the Tilari massacre provided inspiration to the Chipko movement, when people pledged themselves to protect their forests.

There were very few roads in the Himalaya when I was growing up, so most of our journeys took place on foot or on horseback. As a forest conservationist, my father's job was to inspect and manage forests and regenerate them. During all our vacations we joined him on his tours. Our 'rations' would travel in huge boxes laden on mules, and there would always be another box full of books. We lived like nomads, far away from cities, amidst the wealth of the forest. This experience has clearly influenced my thinking about wealth and poverty; for me, the forests of my childhood were the source of abundance and beauty, diversity and peace. With my sister, I would collect ferns to turn into works of art; wild flowers were our pearls and diamonds. That is why when the forests started to disappear, I joined the Chipko movement to protect them.

The Chipko movement is historically, philosophically and organisationally an extension of the traditional Gandhian satyagraha. Its special significance lies in the fact that it took place in post-Independence India; the continuity between the pre-Independence and post-Independence forms of this satyagraha has been provided by Gandhians, including Sri Dev Suman, Mira Behn and Sarala Behn. Equipped with the

Gandhian world view of development based on justice and ecological stability, they contributed silently to the growth of woman power and ecological consciousness in the hill areas of Uttar Pradesh. The influence of these two European disciples of Gandhi on the struggle for social justice and ecological stability in the hills of Uttar Pradesh has been immense – they generated a new breed of Gandhian activists who laid the foundation for the Chipko movement. Sundarlal Bahuguna is prominent among this new generation, deeply inspired by Mira Behn and Sarala Behn. Influenced by Sri Dev Suman, he joined the independence movement at the age of thirteen, and later worked with Mira Behn in the Bhilangana valley where he imbibed her ecological vision. In an article written in 1952, Mira Behn had stated that there was "Something Wrong in the Himalaya":

Year after year the floods in the north of India seem to be getting worse, and this year they have been absolutely devastating. This means that there is something radically wrong in the Himalayas, and that 'something' is, without doubt, connected with the forests. It is not, I believe, just a matter of deforestation as some people think, but largely a matter of change of species.

Living in the Himalayas, as I have been continuously now for several years, I have become painfully aware of a vital change in the species of trees which is creeping up and up the southern slopes – those very slopes which let down the flood waters onto the plains below. This deadly change-over is from banj (Himalayan oak) to chir pine. It is going on at an alarming speed, and because it is not a matter of deforestation but of change from one kind of forest to another, it is not taken sufficiently seriously. In fact, the quasi-commercial forest department is inclined to shut its eyes to the phenomenon because the banj brings in no cash for the coffers, whereas the chir pine is very profitable, yielding as it does both timber and resin.

Mira Behn had identified not merely deforestation but change in species suitable to commercial forestry as the reason for ecological degradation in the Himalayas. She recognised that the leaf litter of oak forests was the primary mechanism for water conservation in mountain watersheds.

My connections to Chipko predate Chipko

Mira Behn and Sarala Behn were frequent visitors to our home. Sunderlal Bahuguna and Bimla Bahuguna, too, came to meet my parents, and Ghanshyam Raturi, the legendary Chipko poet, would spend hours with my mother, reciting his new songs. Our home was open house for social activists, poets and intellectuals; its stimulating environment must have been part of the informal education that made ecological values and values of social and economic equality basic to my life and work.

In 1972, women in a high-altitude village, Reni, blocked logging operations by wrapping their arms around the trees, giving birth to the Chipko (literally, to cling) movement. The name was given to the movement by Ghanshyam Raturi (Shailani) who composed folk songs which were sung by every child, woman and man in Garhwal.

Nineteen seventy-two witnessed the most widespread organised protests against commercial exploitation of Himalayan forests by outside contractors, in Uttarkashi on December 12, and in Gopeshwar on December 15. It was during these two protest meetings that Raturi composed his famous poem describing the method of embracing the trees to save them from being felled:

*Embrace the trees and
Save them from being felled;
The property of our hills,
Save it from being looted.*

In 1973 the tempo of the movement in Uttarkashi and Gopeshwar reached new heights. Raturi and Chandi Prasad Bhatt were the main organisers; while a meeting of the Sarvodaya Mandal was in progress in Gopeshwar in April 1973, the first popular action to chase away the contractors erupted spontaneously in the region, when villagers demonstrated against the felling of ash trees in Mandal forest. Bahuguna immediately asked his colleagues to proceed on foot to Chamoli district, following the axe-men and encouraging people to oppose them wherever they went. Later, in December 1973, there was a militant non-violent demonstration in Uttarkashi in which thousands of people participated. In March 1974, twenty-seven women under the leadership of Goura Devi saved a large number of trees from a contractor's axe in Reni, following which the government was forced to abolish the private contract system of felling. This was the first major achievement of the movement and marks the end of one phase.

During the next five years Chipko resistance spread to various parts of the Garhwal Himalaya. It is important to note that it was no longer the old demand for the supply of forest products to local small industries, but a new one for ecological control of forest resource extraction to ensure a supply of water and fodder, that was being aired. Among the numerous examples of Chipko's successes throughout the Garhwal Himalaya in later years, are those in the Adwani, Amarsar and Badiyargarh forests. The Adwani forests were scheduled to be felled in the first week of December 1977. Large groups of women led by Bachhni Devi came forward to save the trees. (Interestingly, Bachhni Devi was the wife of the local village head, who was himself a contractor.) Chipko activist, Dhoom Singh Negi, supported the women's struggle by undertaking a fast in the forest; women tied sacred threads to the trees, symbolising their vow of protection. Between

December 13-20 a large number of women from fifteen villages guarded the forests, while discourses from ancient texts on the role of forests in Indian life continued non-stop. It was here in Adwani that the ecological slogan: "What do the forests bear? Soil, water and pure air" was born.

The axe-men withdrew only to return on February 1, 1978 with two truckloads of armed police. The plan was to encircle the forests with the help of the police in order to keep the people out during the felling operation. Even before the police reached the area, volunteers of the movement entered the forests and explained their case to the forest labourers who had been brought in from distant places. By the time the contractors arrived each tree was being embraced by three volunteers. The police, seeing the level of awareness among the people, hastily withdrew before nightfall.

In March 1978, a new auction was planned in Narendranagar. A large popular demonstration was organised against it and the police arrested twenty-three Chipko volunteers, including women. In December 1978, a massive felling programme was planned by the public sector Uttar Pradesh Forest Development Corporation in the Badiyargarh region. The local people immediately informed Bahuguna who began a fast unto death at the felling site in January 1979. On the eleventh day of his fast he was arrested in the middle of the night; this only served to strengthen the commitment of the people. Ghanshyam Raturi and a priest, Khima Shastri, led the movement as thousands of men and women from neighbouring villages joined them in the Badiyargarh forests. The people guarded the trees for eleven days, after which the contractors finally withdrew. Bahuguna was released from jail on January 31, 1979.

The cumulative impact of sustained grassroots struggles to protect forests resulted in a rethinking of forest management in the hill areas. The Chipko demand for declaring the

Himalayan forests as 'protection' forests instead of 'production' forests for commercial exploitation, was recognised at the highest policy making level. The then prime minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, after a meeting with Bahuguna, recommended a fifteen-year ban on commercial green felling in the Himalayan forests of Uttar Pradesh.

The moratorium on green felling gave the Chipko movement breathing time to expand its base, and Bahuguna undertook a 4,780 km long, arduous march from Kashmir to Kohima, contacting villagers along the long Himalayan range and spreading the message of Chipko. At the same time, activists found it opportune to take the movement to other mountain regions in the country.

I decided in 1974 that, while pursuing my PhD in quantum theory, I would volunteer with Chipko every vacation. And that is what I did.

Chipko was clearly my university for ecology. While my parents provided the embedding in a forest culture and an appreciation of natural mixed forests, it was Chipko that made me realise, in intimate detail, how biodiversity is at the heart of sustainable economies, and how nature provides basic needs to the large majority in the world. As I worked with peasant women, transferring fertility from the forest to the field, I learnt my first lessons in organic farming: sustainable societies rest on humus. In those early years, as I moved between quantum physics and protecting the Himalayan forests, I learnt to respect both the best of modern ecological science and the best of traditional knowledge. I developed a humility about my doctorate studies, recognising how much I did not know, and how much knowledge illiterate village women, with no formal education, had. That is why the term "knowledge society" as a description of computer-based societies is to me so inaccurate and misleading, implying that non-industrialised, non-computerised societies are without

knowledge. In the case of biodiversity, of forest species and plant species, this is clearly not true; women and indigenous communities, the excluded of the industrial world, are the real custodians of biodiversity-related knowledge.

Nuclear physics was my chosen speciality until I realised that the science had a dark side to it. I changed course to become a theoretical physicist and worked in foundations of quantum theory, fully expecting to stay on and become a professor, when I was confronted with the nagging thought that I wasn't informed enough about how society works. We (India) have the third largest scientific community in the world. We are among the poorest of countries. Science and technology are supposed to create growth, remove poverty. Where is the gap? I wanted to answer this question for myself so I took three years off to look at science policy issues, be a little more educated, socially, and then go back to physics. I went to the Indian Institute of Science and the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore where I studied interdisciplinary research in science, technology and environmental policy.

After three or four years, what started as a look at policy issues became the focus of my life. Speeding me along a course that would ultimately lead to grassroots activism was my growing reputation as an authority in the field of environmental impact. I found myself learning more and more about the threat posed by biotechnology to biodiversity. The Ministry of Environment invited me in 1981 to study the effects of mining in the Doon valley. As a result of my report, the Supreme Court banned mining there in 1983. This was the first time I had done something professionally about conservation – it was not just an academic engagement divorced from action or consequences. I found it so fulfilling, working with communities and making a difference to society.

Research by itself cannot save the environment.

Empowered communities are where action takes place, so I set up the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology in Dehradun in 1981-82, to connect to communities and treat *them* as experts. I also decided on a holistic approach to research because I believed that, for instance, geology cannot tell us that we are destroying water resources, geo-hydrology does that. It was this aspect of my work that was recognised when I was given the Right Livelihood Award in 1993, for creating a new paradigm for research and for working in novel ways with communities.

I realised during the great drought in Karnataka in 1984 that the very way we do agriculture is flawed. That year also saw the peak of militancy in Punjab. I wrote about the violence of the green revolution that gave rise to a non-sustainable form of agriculture, pretending to create more food but actually destroying nature, farmers' sense of self, and creating war within society. What was really a sustainability and democracy issue was politicised and communalised.

In 1987, during a meeting at the UN, I thought, Mahatma Gandhi used a charkha to spearhead satyagraha; I came up with the idea of the seed as an equivalent of the charkha for our modern satyagraha against the appropriation of agriculture by MNCs. Navdanya was born in that moment of awareness although it did not become a full-fledged organisation till 1991. The conservation farm was started about five years later with a view to inspire farmers to come and see two hundred and fifty varieties of rice and eight hundred species of plants growing in the same field.

When Satish Kumar, editor of *Resurgence*, asked me to set up something on the lines of the Schumacher College in India I hesitated, because I preferred building movements to building buildings. But he convinced me that it was time for an institution like Bija, and so we came up with Bija (seed) mainly because the university was going to be at the Navdanya

farm which was a seed bank, and also because a seed is an inspiration for renewal, and an example of the small embodying the whole. Bija Vidyapeeth had really become a bija; instead of buildings, I could see the progression of a dialogue and mutual growth. And so we both continued to hold courses with Schumacher College, and the best of people agreed to come and teach: the physicist, Fritjof Capra, Body Shop founder, Anita Roddick, and Satish himself.

The farm at Pirumadara

My mother's farm was at Pirumadara (which means the place where a great pir rests), very close to the Corbett National Park, a famous tiger reserve in the foothills of the Nainital Tarai. My older brother and sister were born in Nainital, and till I was twelve, I studied in a convent there. In the early years, weekends often meant going down to the farm at Pirumadara. We would first take a bus to the plains, and then a train. A bullock-cart would come to receive us at the station to take us to the farm which was five miles away. A giant bargad ficus dropped its twenty aerial roots down to create a bigger shelter than our little cottage on the farm, which had first been a tent, then a straw hut, and finally a small brick house. Most of my time was spent in the shade of the ficus tree, either sitting or playing on the swing. Our parents had planted an orchard and a garden, and every fruit imaginable was available for plucking – litchee and mango, guava and lemon, pomegranate and sharifa.

Next to the house flowed an irrigation canal, called 'gul' in the local language, where we would jump in and swim whenever we wanted to, and at mealtimes we would go off to the fields to collect mustard leaves or chickpea or bathua for saag – the typical broth of greens in Indian cuisine, nutritionally very rich in iron, vitamin A and B complex.

Thus, even though my parents were educated and middle

class and we were sent to the fanciest English schools, we were also educated in ways that rural children are – by the trees and the soil. This is probably why ecology for me is not just an intellectual response; it is, in a very physical sense, the feel of the earth, and I am grateful to my parents for giving us the opportunity to grow up in the two worlds that India encompasses – a rural majority and a westernised elite. Though having access to privileged education we did not make it the source of arrogance, insulation and exclusion. It is this growing insulation between a rural India of farmers and an urban westernised elite that is dividing India so deeply today and threatening her very survival as an equitable and ecological civilisation.

Early lessons in feminine power

When I was about four we had to rush off to a small village called Duhai, near Meerut, where my mother's father had built the first school for rural girls. He had wanted the school to become a college. As was typical in those days, anyone working for social change used fasting as a means to draw attention to their cause. My grandfather not only did not eat any food he also did not drink any water. He died fasting for girls' education. The President of India arrived one day after his death to announce that the school would now be a college.

My mother was the first in her community to have become a graduate. She studied in Lahore at Lady Mcleggan College, and her mentor was Sir Chhotu Ram, who played an extremely important role in protecting the rights of peasants. The law on land alienation that he passed was critical to preventing the creation of landlessness in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, of the kind found in Bengal, Orissa and Bihar, where the British had introduced the zamindari system. In north-west India, land stayed in the hands of owner-cultivators, largely due to Chhotu Ram's efforts.

My mother was also deeply influenced by Gandhi, and travelled alone from Lahore to Poona to meet him when he was in jail. Her book, *Two Words with My Sisters and Gandhi's Teachings* is based on the special brand of Indian feminism which can be called Gandhian socialist feminism; it is not a liberation based on an individual as an atomised construct, but the broad and deep emancipation of all members of society from all oppressions – social, cultural and economic.

My parents were the ultimate feminists – my father would cook and sew our clothes, my mother attended public meetings and joined politics. The subtle education in our home was that there was no difference between being a man or woman, boy or girl. This education in equality ran so deep that my sister and I would use the masculine description of self because we were copying our brother who was the oldest. We grew up happily unaware of all these differences, and our parents did not consider it important to teach us gender discrimination. We were even allowed to choose our own names. I settled for Vandana when I was eleven; Mira, my sister, took equally long to adopt a name to her liking, but Kuldeep, our brother, stayed with the name given by our parents.

We grew up as totally free spirits – seeking our personhood, unencumbered by the burdens of caste, religion and gender identity, and our parents took every care to create the context for that freedom that I hold so dear and defend so ferociously in everything I do.

Half a century has passed since my childhood. My parents are no more, but Mira, Kuldeep and I still share one world and each of us, in our own way, continues to live the values of simplicity and sharing, compassion and caring, conservation and protection that we imbibed from our wonderful parents.

From quanta to the seed

Physics was my passion and my chosen profession. In school

I received the science talent scholarship which gave me the opportunity to train in India's leading scientific institutions. I trained as a nuclear physicist at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, but moved to theoretical physics when my sister, Mira, a medical doctor, made me aware of nuclear hazards. I realised then that most science is partial; I wanted to practise a holistic science and was drawn to quantum theory for its non-reductionist, non-mechanist paradigm.

Before leaving for Canada to do my PhD I wanted to visit my favourite places in the Himalayas, but the forests and streams had disappeared in the insane rush to build dams and roads, to grow apples by cutting down rich oak forests which absorb the monsoon rains to release the water slowly as streams.

I returned to India after my PhD because I wanted both, to give back to my society and to understand it better, and so I chose the difficult and challenging path of trying to combine scientific research with social and ecological responsibility.

In 1980, while I was at the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore, we witnessed the conversion of farmlands around the city into monocultures of eucalyptus plantations. We tried to understand what was driving this and found that the World Bank was financing eucalyptus plantations for the pulp industry, but called it "social forestry". The study, "Ecological Audit of Eucalyptus" that I did with my colleagues at IIM had a huge impact; it travelled to Thailand, Portugal, Brazil and was used to challenge the idea that commercial plantations are "forests". Mr. Idris, founder of the Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) and of the Third World Network in Malaysia, read the study and invited me to a forest conference in Penang. From that meeting was born the World Rainforest Movement, a network of forest defenders, worldwide.

It was becoming increasingly evident to me that scientific expertise worked more in the service of capital and the

destruction of nature, whereas I wanted to work in the service of people and nature. In 1981, I decided to leave academics and start an independent institute to support grassroots ecology movements.

In 1984, a number of tragic events took place in India. In June, the Golden Temple was attacked because it was harbouring terrorists; by November, Indira Gandhi had been assassinated; and in December, the worst industrial disaster took place in Bhopal, when Union Carbide's pesticide plant leaked a toxic gas into the environment. Thirty thousand people died in the terrorism in Punjab, thirty thousand have died in the "industrial terrorism" of Bhopal. This is equal to twelve 9/11s. I was forced to sit up and ask why agriculture had become like war. Why did the Green Revolution which received the Nobel Peace Prize, breed extremism and terrorism in Punjab? This questioning led to my books, *The Violence of the Green Revolution* and *Monocultures of the Mind*. Blindness to diversity and self-organisation in nature and society was clearly a basic problem in the mechanistic, Cartesian, industrial paradigm, and this blindness led to false claims that industrial monocultures in forestry, farming, fisheries and animal husbandry produced more food and were necessary to remove hunger and poverty. On the contrary, monocultures produce less and use more inputs, thus destroying the environment and impoverishing people.

In 1987, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation organised a meeting in Geneva on biotechnology called "Laws of Life". I was invited because of my book on the Green Revolution. At the conference, the biotech industry laid out its plans – to patent life; to genetically engineer seeds, crops and life forms; and to get full freedom to trade through the GATT negotiations, which culminated in the WTO. This led to my focus on intellectual property rights, free trade, globalisation – and to a life dedicated to saving seeds and promoting organic farming as an alternative

to a world dictated and controlled by corporations.

Having dedicated my life to the defence of the intrinsic worth of all species, the idea of life forms, seeds and biodiversity being reduced to corporate inventions and, hence, corporate property, was abhorrent to me. Further, if seeds become "intellectual property", saving and sharing them becomes an intellectual property theft! Our highest duty, to save seeds, becomes a criminal act. The legalising of the criminal act of owning and monopolising life through patents on seeds and plants, was morally and ethically unacceptable to me. So I started Navdanya, a movement which promotes biodiversity conservation, and seed-saving and seed-sharing among farmers. Navdanya has created more than twenty community seed banks through which seeds are saved and freely exchanged among our three lakh members. Through this we have brought back forgotten foods like jhangora (barnyard millet), ragi (finger millet), marsha (amaranth), naurangi dal and gahat dal. Not only are these crops more nutritious than globally traded commodities, they are more resource-prudent, requiring only 200–300 mm. of rain compared to 2,500 mm. for chemical rice farming. Millets could increase food production four hundred-fold, using the same amount of limited water. These forgotten foods are foods of the future, and farmers' seeds are the seeds of the future. For the farmer, the seed is not merely the source of future plants and food; it is the storage place of culture, of history. Seed is the first link in the food chain, it is the ultimate symbol of food security.

The free exchange of seed among farmers has been the basis of maintaining biodiversity as well as food security, and is based on cooperation and reciprocity. A farmer who wants to exchange seed generally gives an equal quantity of seed from his field in return for the seed he gets. But this exchange goes beyond seeds; it involves an exchange of ideas and

knowledge, of culture and heritage. It is an accumulation of tradition, of knowledge, of how to work the seed. Farmers gather knowledge about the seeds they want to grow by watching them grow in other farmers' fields, by learning about drought and disease and pest resistance.

In saving seeds and biodiversity we are protecting cultural diversity. Navdanya means nine seeds, it also means 'new gift' in the face of the extinction of species and the extinction of small farmers. The nine seeds and their respective navgrahas (nine cosmic correlates) are:

1. Yava (barley) represents the sun
2. Shamaka (little millet) represents the moon
3. Togari (pigeon-pea) represents Mars, which is responsible for controlling the nervous system
4. Madga (moong) represents Mercury and stimulates intelligence
5. Kadale (chick-pea) represents Jupiter
6. Tandula (rice) represents Venus
7. Til (sesame) represents Saturn and is characterised by oil
8. Maasha (black gram) represents Rahu
9. Kulitha (horse-gram) represents Ketu

Contrary to the myth of industrial agriculture, biodiverse systems produce more food and higher incomes than industrial monocultures. Our baranaja (twelve seeds) system yields twice as much output and three times higher incomes than a monoculture of corn. The twelve crops are:

1. Phapra (*Fagopyrum tataricum*)
2. Mandua (*Eleusine coracana*)
3. Marsha (*Amaranthus frumentaceus*)
4. Bhat (*Glycine soja*)
5. Lobia (*Vigna catianga*)
6. Moong (*Phaseolus mungo*)
7. Gahat (*Dolichos biflorus*)
8. Rajma (*Phaseolus vulgaris*)
9. Jakhia (*Cleome viscosa*)

10. Navrangi (*Vigna umbellata*)
11. Jowar (*Sorghum vulgare*)
12. Urad (*Phaseolus mungo*)

Our conservation of heritage rice varieties has led to the protection of the original, authentic basmati as part of a slow food presidium. We have saved more than three thousand rice varieties; including over thirty aromatic rices. The saline resistant seeds we have saved helped Orissa farmers recover from the super cyclone of 1999 which killed thirty thousand people. These seeds were also distributed by Navdanya in rehabilitation after the 2005 tsunami. We are now creating "Seeds of Hope" seed banks to deal with climate chaos. Heritage seeds that can survive droughts, floods and cyclones will be collected, saved, multiplied and distributed. Farmers' seed-breeding is far ahead of scientific breeding and genetic engineering in providing flood-resistant, drought-resistant, saline-resistant varieties. In the context of farmers' heritage, genetic engineering is, in fact, a laggard technology.

Not only are corporate, industrial breeding strategies incapable of dealing with climate change, genetically engineered seeds are killing farmers. In India, according to a debate in parliament, more than one lakh farmers have committed suicide because of debt caused by high costs and unreliable seeds sold by corporations. Suicides are concentrated in areas which have become dependent on commercial seeds, and are most intense where genetically engineered Bt. Cotton has been sold. These are seeds of suicide and seeds of slavery. There are no suicides where farmers use heritage seeds and their own traditional varieties.

Like Gandhi's salt satyagraha, we have undertaken the seed satyagraha – a commitment to not cooperate with patent laws and seed laws which prevent farmers from saving and exchanging seed. Seed freedom is our birthright, without seed freedom there is no food freedom.

In May 2006, Navdanya undertook a Seed Pilgrimage (Bija Yatra) to stop farmers' suicides and create an agriculture of hope. We are building a movement to stop the genocide of our farmers and reclaim our seed and food sovereignty. The Yatra started from Gandhi's ashram in Sevagram, District Wardha, Maharashtra, and ended on May 26 in Bangalore. It covered Amravati, Yavatmal and Nagpur in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra; Adilabad, Warangal, Karimnagar and Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh; and Bidar, Gulbarga, Raichur, Hospet, Chitradurg and Bangalore in Karnataka. These are the regions where farmers have been locked into dependence on corporate seed supply in order to grow cash crops integrated into world markets – leading to a collapse in farm prices due to subsidies of four hundred billion dollars in rich countries.

Privatisation of the earth's resources – of water, of biodiversity – is the ultimate social and ecological violation of human rights. The earth yields resources to be shared, conserved and used sustainably. The very ideas of owning life through patents, of owning and selling water through concessions and commodification are symptoms of the deep regression of the human species. Over the years, resisting the enclosure of the commons and aiding their recovery has defined my thinking and my actions in my books, *Biopiracy*, *Water Wars* and *Stolen Harvest*.

This is why I have fought against the biopiracy patents on neem, basmati and wheat, and this is why I have fought against the commodification of the Ganga and the privatisation of Delhi's water supply, a story we have recounted in our reports, "Ganga: Common Heritage or Commodity?" and "Water Democracy vs. Water Privatisation". Defending our fundamental freedoms has become fighting 'free trade' to protect our seed freedom (bija swaraj), food freedom (anna swaraj), water freedom (jal swaraj), land freedom (bhu swaraj), forest freedom (vana swaraj), and reinventing democracy as

Earth Democracy, the democracy of all life and the democracy of everyday life.

These new movements for freedom need new learning, new empowerment, new hope. From the seed I learnt lessons of self-organisation and renewal, diversity and democracy; from quantum theory I learnt about non-separability and non-locality; indeterminism and uncertainty; complementarity and non-exclusion; potential and probability. Both the quanta and the seed take us beyond the mechanistic, fragmented, divided, inert, linear, deterministic world of reductionist science, and the industrialisation and commodification of life which is destroying the fragile fabric of the planet and society. In different ways, both the seed and the quanta create a world of relationships, of connectedness, of dynamic evolution and ever-new potential. With the seed we can re-weave the web of life in partnership with other species while increasing their potential to meet basic human needs in sustainable and equitable ways. In the freedom of the seed lies the hope and potential for a better world; and in each of us lie the seeds of our deepest and highest humanity, which comes from returning to our membership in the earth family.



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Her pioneering and award-winning book – *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* – helped place the issue of women's land rights in the national and global policy arena. In 2005, she catalysed a successful campaign for gender equality in Hindu inheritance law. Her latest book is *Gender and Green Governance*. In 2008, she received a Padma Shri from the President of India, and in 2010, the Leontief Prize from Tufts University "for broadening the frontiers of economic thought". Bina Agarwal has been part of the women's and the environment movements in India, and internationally, since the early 1980s.

On Becoming a Humanist Feminist

BINA AGARWAL

LONG before I became part of the feminist movement and long before I knew the word or its meaning, I believe I was a feminist. The seeds were sown early, during a summer spent with my grandmother in a village in Rajasthan. I was barely five years old, and my parents had sent me off alone without my two older sisters. I shadowed my grandmother as she cooked and pickled and filled a locked pantry with delicious-smelling edibles. My grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins lived in a medium-sized two-storeyed haveli on the edge of the village, privileged with a drinking-water well in front, so deep that a pair of bullocks had to walk down a slope to pull up the bucket. The village lay on the left of the haveli, and on the right, sand dunes stretched into the horizon. Several branches of the extended family lived in the house. During the day, without easy access to flour mills, a major chore for young daughters-in-law, even in such upper-income families, was to hand-grind the grain with a primitive two-stone grinder. And in the evenings, just before bedtime, my grandmother apportioned milk for the little boys but not for the little girls, although there was plenty for both. Indulged as a city child I was counted with the boys, but when I asked on behalf of my girl cousins, I was told "girls don't need milk every evening". With an acute sense of fairness common in children my age,

I recognised the practice for what it was – a form of gender discrimination – a memory strong enough to recall even today as a defining experience.

By the time I was fourteen, I was enough of a believer in women's rights to choose that subject for the school elocution class. I recall rather little of the actual speech but I do remember my impassioned ending: "And let us all pledge that when we are old enough to vote, we will vote for a woman!" Although I no longer believe that simply being a woman candidate is reason enough to vote for her, my school instincts would surely resonate with the many women who are today championing a women's quota in the Indian parliament. Notwithstanding the rousing response my school speech received from my classmates, I also learnt that taking up women's causes was not the best way to get good marks. Our class teacher gave me only 3.5 out of 5 while my classmates, who spoke on conventional 'nice girls' topics, such as 'how to lay the table' or 'good manners', received 4 or 4.5. Indeed, even today many academic institutions, and especially departments of economics – the subject I chose in college – continue to value orthodoxy over heterodoxy, penalising in tenured appointments, scholars whose work might fall even remotely in the category of feminist economics.

In school my responses to gender were driven mainly by black-and-white notions of justice and injustice, and gender inequality was for me an issue of justice and fairness. But when I joined college, more visceral aspects of growing up to womanhood emerged. The most immediate and everyday of these was dealing with men's unwelcome stares and touching in DTC buses and public places as I made my way to Miranda House as a day scholar. I wish I had then thought of the innovative method that younger Mirandians later devised, namely keeping a large safety pin handy for plunging into the side of those who tried to grope them! Teenage consciousness

about appearance also brought me face to face with Indian prejudices about skin colour. The more my mother asked me to desist swimming in the hot sun since it baked my brown skin black, the more I rebelled, wishing my skin to become as dark as my long hair. Surprisingly, my maternal grandmother eschewed simple notions of beauty. She had wonderful metaphors for attractiveness, evoking images from the desert oasis which transcended skin colour. Commenting on my young friends she would say "Uske chehre par pani hai" (literally, she has 'water on her face') or "Uske chehre par haryali hai" ('she has freshness on her face'). I hoped some day, after my teenage pimples had cleared, that my mother would also view my appearance through a similar lens. Those experiences created a layered gender consciousness which was complex and intensely personal.

Yet perhaps it was not so personal. Exposure to a flood of western feminist writing that was emerging in the early 1970s brought recognition that women's experiences had much in common, globally. Wide-eyed and excited I raced through Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan, Shulamith Firestone and Simone de Beauvoir, among others, arguing with friends who were also reading their books, as well as with those who were *not* reading them.

Moving from personal experience to writing about women's situation was incidental. It was 1973. I had just returned from Cambridge after completing the economics tripos when Romesh Thapar invited me to write for a special issue of *Seminar* on women's status. I had never published before and I agonised over the piece. But that article helped define, rather early, the area in which I would go on to do original research – women in agriculture. Soon thereafter I wrote many other articles on women's status, on gender differences in higher education and employment, on other social inequalities such as caste, and on the intersectionality of class

and gender. I also tried to bring to my doctoral thesis some elements of a critical gender perspective.

My thesis was on agricultural mechanisation in India, with a particular focus on the Indian Punjab. It was accepted practice in agricultural economics to aggregate male and female farm labour by counting female labour time as equivalent to half or three-fourths that of males, simply because women were paid less than men for similar work. Discrimination in the market-place thus permeated academic analysis and led to discriminatory assumptions, with little concrete evidence. Then, unexpectedly, I found evidence to the contrary in the engineering department of the Punjab Agricultural University. The engineers had tested the efficiency of potato digging equipment and found women labourers to be almost three times as productive as the men! This helped me justify placing male and female labour at least on par, and to defend my assumption successfully in the thesis *viva-voce*.

An agnostic approach towards accepted tenets and an emphasis on empirical verification where possible, has stood me in good stead not only for undermining male-biased assumptions in mainstream disciplines but also for challenging feminist dogmas. When I was researching the gender impact of technological change in agriculture, for instance, several women's studies scholars repeatedly argued that agricultural mechanisation would throw women out of work. Yet when I empirically examined its impact, I found the opposite. Tractorisation, for example, did not displace women at all, since women do not plough or till, while mechanised irrigation, such as via tubewells, by increasing cropping intensity actually increased the demand for female labour (especially casual labour) for sowing, weeding and harvesting. Agnosticism and verification, I believe, are especially important for analytical rigour where there are strong stakes in particular arguments, such as those relating to gender, religion or race.

I was also exposed fairly early on to a rich body of emerging academic scholarship, from a feminist perspective, across disciplines at the Subordination of Women workshop held at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Sussex, in September 1978. Organised by Kate Young (a socialist-feminist anthropologist), this was the first such gathering for me. I had just completed a PhD in economics from Delhi University and arrived at IDS as a visiting fellow, just in time for the workshop. It was a feast for the range and depth of intellectual discussions – both theoretical and applied – including a critique of Marxism from a feminist perspective. It is now easy to see why the workshop was so exciting. Almost every scholar who came to it would go on to make significant contributions in her field. Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson were there, presenting their seminal piece on women in the electronics factories of Malaysia and Singapore, as was Maxine Molyneux, whose distinction between practical and strategic gender needs is now cited globally; Ann Whitehead, widely known for her anthropological work on African women's role in food production; Olivia Harris, whose critique of households as natural units broke new ground; Noeleen Heyzer, now head of ESCAP and earlier head of UNIFEM in New York; Elizabeth Croll, who did pioneering work on rural women in China; and many others, including our very own Neera Desai and Nirmala Banerjee. It was all held together by Kate Young at her feisty best. In the evening activist groups were invited to IDS, such as the battered women's collective in Brighton, and the first Asian women's refuge in London founded by Amrit Wilson, author of *Finding a Voice*. Today, IDS Sussex has one of the most sought-after masters programmes on gender and development, but in 1978 gender was not high on the Institute's agenda – Kate Young played a major role in placing it there.

The exhilarating Eighties

My writings on gender inequality much preceded my involvement as an activist in the women's movement. I date that involvement to 1981 after I returned from a two-year sojourn at Sussex University. While deciding on the offers I had received from various academic institutions in India, I volunteered time with the Mehrauli group of Action India, in particular with Renuka Misra and Primila Lewis who were supporting the livelihood struggles of farm labourers and stone-quarry workers on Delhi's outskirts. The anti-dowry campaign was also beginning to gather momentum. In the late 1970s, several activists gave a name to what many had long suspected, that the deaths of young married women by burning were not 'accidents' but 'dowry murders' – the killing of women by husbands and in-laws because of their inability to satisfy demands for dowry. In 1979 there was also a public outcry by women against the rape of a sixteen-year-old tribal girl, Mathura, in police custody. Violence against women, as embodied in rape and dowry murders, flagged off the second wave of the women's movement in India. The first wave dated to the pre-Independence period (the 1930s and 1940s), with the emergence of several national women's organisations who had focused, in particular, on women's rights to property, education and the vote. In the 1980s the emphasis shifted, with due cause but not without due costs, as I will recount below.

This second wave of the movement was characterised by the emergence of a wide range of autonomous women's organisations and collectives across India (Saheli, Stree Shakti Sangathan, Forum Against Oppression of Women, Manushi, among many others), organisations that were self-consciously independent and distinct from women's organisations linked to political parties. The groups were diverse and dispersed, and some debated whether this could be called a 'movement'.

I believe it could. The women's movement, in my view, includes within its gamut all organisations and individuals who work principally against gender discrimination – from women's organisations connected to political parties to newly-formed autonomous groups, grassroots women's development organisations, and individual men and women in the academy, the media and elsewhere.

The 1980s were almost like a renaissance vis-à-vis women's rights. Although the 1970s had been marked by several significant firsts, including the publication of India's first Status of Women Report; the first World Congress of Women in Mexico; the emergence of major women's development organisations such as the Self-Employed Women's Association; and the questioning of gender bias by small regional movements of working class women, the 1980s were a quantum leap. This was so not only on women's issues, but on civil rights and environmental concerns in which, too, I became involved, having just finished a book critiquing the top-down social forestry programmes being pursued by governments and international agencies. On the woman question, there was ferment in all the major cities. And it was very visible on the streets in large protest rallies, neighbourhood demonstrations and street theatre, as middle class and working class women came out to demand gender equality and freedom from male violence. There was an immense surge of energy which swept us off our feet, even as we ourselves contributed to the surge. And the media coverage magnified the impact, much beyond the immediate context.

The Dahej Virodhi Chetna Manch (DVCM: a platform for resistance against dowry), formed in the early Eighties epitomised this ferment. It was a landmark in its ability to bring women together from across the political spectrum in a strategic partnership. Ideologically, the organisations that constituted the platform ranged from the far right to the far

left, but strategically their unity was aimed at challenging existing laws and social understanding of the issue. Immense activity preceded the final rally – strategising, lobbying, poster-making, writing songs and slogans, attending numerous meetings to arrive at a consensus for framing demands (an aspect in which I was especially active), and printing pamphlets. After months of planning, the campaign culminated in a march to parliament in 1983, for legal amendment and effective implementation. Several thousand women and men, individuals as well as members of a wide spectrum of organisations, marched along the streets of Delhi. Some carried children on their shoulders or babies in slings. Young and middle-aged, persons of all classes, castes and religious persuasion moved in a pulsating, winding stream. We carried banners, sang songs, shouted slogans. Television and newspaper reporters moved alongside. As a result of the campaign the government introduced a bill in parliament in 1984 to amend the dowry law and it became an Act in 1986. Until the DVCM campaign no other issue had brought together such a diversity of women for a single cause; and since then, no other issue has led to such a mobilisation, not even the campaign for women's quotas in parliament launched in the 2000s.

Throughout the early Eighties, street protests were integral to any campaign launched by the women's movement. There were no twenty-four hour TV channels then, and a demonstration was an effective way of calling public and media attention to an issue. Not all rallies were as large as that of the DVCM but even small, focused demonstrations could be effective, such as those spearheaded by the Manushi collective outside the marital homes of dowry murder victims, which helped to shame perpetrators in the eyes of the community. Other creative ways of raising public awareness included street theatre during lunch breaks outside major office complexes; feminist interpretations of epics and folk

characters in mainstream theatres; petitions to government departments; and letters to the editor. Each woman did her bit.

In 1983, Kamla Basin and I formed a committee on the portrayal of women in the media with around sixty male and female members, including from thirteen organisations. We began with an analysis of sexism in advertisements carried by newspapers, magazines and on TV, and then moved to direct action. We used a variety of methods to spread awareness and challenge negative portrayals – from letters and articles in newspapers to painting over offensive public hoardings by carrying cans of paint and ladders. Following adverse publicity, advertisers usually withdrew the offensive ads, and one campaign which was especially effective was that against pornographic films. The depiction of nudity did not bother us, but sadomasochism did. At the time, fourteen cinemas in Delhi were screening such films in their morning shows. One committee member who saw a few described them as 'horror films' in their depiction of sex and violence against women. They were also being exported illegally. We decided to demonstrate outside a cinema hall in the heart of New Delhi on a Saturday. Since large numbers could not legally gather there we arrived in twos and threes, at a prescribed time, with banners and leaflets. The leaflets explained to cinema-goers why we objected to the screenings. The show was cancelled and almost every major newspaper and many TV channels carried the story the following day. Members of the committee also met the minister for information and broadcasting. As a result, all such films were withdrawn and even nine months later, none were being screened. Some aspects of these campaigns are captured in articles in a 1985 publication that Kamla Bhasin and I edited, published jointly by Kali for Women and Isis International.

Those were exhilarating times. They were also crowded

times. In 1982 I had just joined as an associate professor of economics at the Institute of Economic Growth, located on the north campus of Delhi University. I lived in Golf Links and a commute to the university took forty-five minutes one way. My days were stretched and my evenings and weekends were occupied with preparations for some campaign or other in South Delhi, at the opposite end of the city. For marches I took official leave. In 1982, we were preparing to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8. Feminist songs set to popular folk tunes were becoming an integral part of such events and many of us sang them. Some, such as *Tod tod ke bandhano ko dekho behne ati hain* (Breaking their shackles the sisters have come out), written by Kamla Bhasin, became especially popular and were sung at many gatherings, including the Second National Conference of Women's Studies at Trivandrum in 1984. A film made by an all-women team of Canadian film-makers, *No Longer Silent*, captured some of the activities and spirit that went into preparing for 8 March, 1985. It also caught an entire sequence of playing Holi, shot at my parents' house, where the festival was celebrated with particular zeal, including by dipping unsuspecting visitors into tubs of purple and emerald coloured water.

Oh, those conferences!

It is difficult to imagine today how much was crammed into those early years. Autonomous women's groups emerged not only in Delhi, but in Bombay, Bangalore, Hyderabad and many other cities across the country. Many groups spearheaded protests against all forms of violence against women, including rape and sati in Rajasthan, highlighted by the Roop Kanwar case in 1987, leading to legal amendments. The period was also characterised by intense intellectual debate and analysis in conferences. In particular, two types of national women's conferences were initiated. One was sponsored by the recently

formed Indian Association of Women's Studies (IAWS), and the other by women activists. The IAWS conferences focused on research but also encouraged activists to present papers on their experiences; the activist conferences were dominated by practitioners but also invited women academics in small numbers. This mix created synergy and vibrancy in both types of conferences, although I also felt that the IAWS ones remained rather undefined in terms of their academic identity and strength. When I was on the IAWS board we debated how to balance our desire to be inclusive while also raising the academic bar by exercising some selectivity in the papers presented, but those who favoured selection were out-voted.

Among the IAWS conferences, one that many of us especially recall was the fourth conference held at Vishakapatnam in 1988. I had organised the closing plenary on the theme: "On Feminism and being a Feminist in India", recognising that not everyone in the women's movement was comfortable with the feminist label. The panellists included Vina Mazumdar, Ela Bhatt, Indu Agnihotri and Madhu Kishwar – women representing different elements of the women's movement, some autonomous, some linked to political parties. Kishwar's presentation, "Why I am not a Feminist", in which she argued that she did not believe in any 'ism', including feminism, was especially provocative. I then opened up the debate to the four hundred-odd participants. For three hours, dozens of women came to the podium to affirm their feminist identity and share their experiences. It was a walk down history lane, often emotional and very personal. Kishwar's talk, in particular, evoked a strong contrary response, causing many to assert that no matter what the label, they were feminists in spirit and belief!

Nineteen eighty-eight was also the year of the largest and best remembered women activists' conference, the Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan, held in Patna. Several thousand village

women, along with urban intellectuals and activists, congregated there. During the day, the gathering split into sub-groups around themes, although even such 'smaller' groups contained over a hundred women each. We sat on the grass in large circles. Women from different regions spoke in their own languages and bilingual listeners translated for those sitting near them. It was a bit chaotic with many translations being whispered simultaneously, but occasional summaries in Hindi or English helped. I was a resource person in the group focusing on women's livelihoods and agriculture. There I met several women who had participated in the famous Bodhgaya Andolan – a peasant movement spearheaded in 1978 by the Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini in Bihar in which, for the first time in India's peasant history, village women successfully agitated for and claimed land rights in their own names, in two villages. Later I was to follow this lead for a chapter in my book, *A Field of One's Own*.

A very different type of activist event also remains indelible. This was a women's fair, organised not by women's movement activists but by Aruna Roy and her group, working with poor rural families in Tilonia village, located 175 kms. from Jaipur city. Aruna had given up a career in civil service to live and work with tribal communities in Rajasthan. The Tilonia Mahila Mela in 1985 made for freshness and a sense of upliftment. Unlike other meetings, this one had no fixed agenda – it was meant to create a space for women to come and be themselves. Some three thousand village women attended the fair along with small numbers of urban women, such as myself. The day would begin with prabhat pheri (the morning round) by a group of women walking to nearby villages to invite others to come. Everyone then gathered for a cup of morning tea, followed by several parallel workshops in which women could act in plays, dance, sing, play games, make posters, or informally discuss issues that concerned

their lives. Since veiling is common in Rajasthan, many women covered their faces with the ends of their saris but soon discovered the power of the mike – of being heard without being seen! And most soon lost their shyness and spoke up freely.

Each day of the fair was uniquely memorable. On the second day, when we gathered for early morning tea in the open, a middle-aged village woman was 'possessed' – flailing her arms, shaking her head from side to side, swirling and speaking loudly. Then, just as suddenly, she quietened down. Later, at a theatre workshop, she made a surprising revelation, that she had weaned her husband from alcohol by enacting a 'possession' and, in that state, beating him whenever he was drunk. She got away with it (as had other women I later read about) since he blamed the spirit and not her for her actions. And so, she claimed, he became a teetotaller!

On the third day of the fair there was another incident. A poor villager brought with him his twelve-year-old daughter who had been raped by the son of an upper-caste landowner. The women at the mela decided to register a case by organising a march to the nearest police station. Next day, the day of the march, it rained. Notwithstanding it, the women went ahead as planned and registered a police case, the first such registration in the area, we were told. It highlighted what we had often observed: on issues that affect their lives deeply, women do not need to be made aware of their disempowerment. Rather they need the means – in this case the power that comes from being part of a group – to seek change. One aspect, however, did concern many of us, namely the problems the young victim and her family might face in the community after we had returned to our cities and villages. Were we not morally responsible if they faced a backlash by the community? In this case, the Tilonia activists could fill the gap, but that was not always possible elsewhere.

We were not alone, however, in our dilemmas or our energy. We knew this from many meetings, including the Second World Congress of Women in Nairobi, in 1985. Very few of us had attended the First World Congress in Mexico in 1975, but at Nairobi women from across the world converged – in just ten years the women's movement had gone global.

Between academia and activism

It was not always easy for me to straddle the two worlds of activism and academia. Activist meetings began in the middle of the day and stretched into the evenings. To meet the demands of both worlds, I found myself running across either end of the city. Also, in the initial euphoria of democratic decision-making, even simple decisions could take hours in an effort to arrive at a consensus by seeking to convince the last sceptic. It was rare to decide by vote. Nor was punctuality a strong point at such meetings. I would often arrive on time to find only the organisers in the room, as people strolled in a half hour or even an hour later. Over time I adjusted to the 'Indian' time clock, but still remained among the early ones.

Since the movement was led largely by full-time activists it was the professional women who had to adjust or stretch their calendars to participate. For the activists, organising, lobbying, demonstrating was part of the job, so to speak; for others, such as myself, such activity was apart from my job. After several years of trying to do both, in the late 1980s I finally took the difficult decision of demarcating the role I could play constructively. I decided to support the causes I valued mainly through my writings, academic or popular, rather than by participating in the daily decision-making processes of groups I was linked with, although I continued to sign petitions and join street rallies. It was a sensible decision which gave me time for what I was best at and reduced

conflicting pulls, although I did miss the excitement of the collective process.

Over the years I have, however, sought to bridge the worlds of academic rigour and grassroots relevance in several ways. First, I have written on subjects that relate to the lives of the most disadvantaged women. For me, perhaps the most heart-warming reception to *A Field of One's Own* – beyond the academic acclaim and prizes the book garnered – was a simple statement by Pamela Philipose (echoed by others) who said at a large public gathering: "Bina has written a book for all of us, for the women's movement." Second, I have tried to write not only for academic journals but also in forms that could prove useful to practitioners and policy-makers. A 2002 pamphlet of mine entitled, "Are we not peasants, too?" published by the Population Council (New York) and translated into Hindi and Gujarati, is an example. I was told by a women's rights activist that the village women considered the pamphlet their prized possession. "Even though they cannot read it, they have memorised the page they may ask to be opened in a court room or during a village council meeting, to get across the fact that women do have land rights."

I have also proactively shared my research with grassroots groups through continued interaction, and by conducting workshops for them in India and elsewhere, as in Bangladesh, Nepal and South Africa. Academically, critiquing mainstream economics while engaging with it, writing on gender while working in mainstream academic institutions, has not been easy, but it has brought dividends, enabling me to chart my own path in research and taking me forward professionally. Over the last two decades, I have also sought to influence policy, both by directly participating in policy forums, such as working groups for formulating India's five year plans, and via interventions in legal reform, such as by catalysing a campaign in 2005 for the amendment of India's inheritance laws to

make them gender equal. Here, my substantial research on inheritance and land laws in South Asia proved invaluable. Opportunities to use one's research to make a significant practical impact are rare, and I still wonder at the conjuncture of factors that led to the success of the Hindu Succession Amendment Act (HSA) campaign.

Relationships

The 1980s was a period dominated (at least implicitly) by the idea of 'romantic sisterhood', as opposed to 'strategic sisterhood' – a distinction I drew when writing about the World Conference on Women in Beijing a decade later. Romantic sisterhood lay in the idea that women would get along with other women because they had so much in common – 'all sisters under the sari', so to speak, borrowing a phrase from Geraldine Forbes who used it to describe the idealised notions about women prevalent during the first wave of the women's movement in India. Although the 1980s movement recognised the structural inequalities of class or caste and women's potential tyranny towards other women within in-law relationships (such as of mothers-in-law towards brides), interpersonal conflicts between women within the movement were glossed over. Yet all around us, just as women were forging bonds, so they were also falling out. Friendships were forming but also breaking up. Although the movement challenged patriarchal power relations, there was a silence around relations of power and oppression among feminists themselves. Would recognising the conflicts have fractured solidarity within the movement? Surely the opposite would have happened if we had discussed the power plays and heartbreaks. Would this not have offered an alternative vision of gender relations?

Many women in the movement also spoke about their special relationships with their mothers while depicting fathers

as strictly patriarchal. Yet, in my own experience and in the experience of several feminist friends from other countries, including Turkey, Iran and the USA, it was often fathers who had played important roles as friends and mentors. I myself had a rather conflicted relationship with my mother due, not least, to being the third daughter before my younger brother arrived, and to our divergent approaches to life, such as her strong belief in religious rituals and my rejection of them. My father, on the other hand, was friend, adviser and confidant. From a well of compassion and wisdom as a humanist rather than as a feminist, he could relate sympathetically both to my personal travails as a woman and to my intellectual pursuits. Indeed, women who have grown up in constrained environments themselves are not necessarily the most likely role models for their daughters. And I still wonder if the mother-daughter bonding might not have been much rarer than affirmed by many of my feminist friends.

Some things missing

Today the 1980s seem a long way away. We had plunged into the deep end and learnt to swim, emerging gasping but afloat. We are older now. The political situation has changed. The next generation of women has other dreams. The palpable intensity that characterised that period has ebbed. Some of the energy was channelled into institutional gains; street demonstrations declined, but gender perspectives became more firmly embedded within institutions. Women's studies took off as a field, making its primary impact in the humanities and to some extent in the social sciences, such as anthropology and sociology. But economics and political science remained largely immune. And even today the university syllabus in economics rarely contains readings from a gender perspective, although internationally, gendered analyses of intra-household dynamics and labour markets are becoming mainstream.

While many within the humanities emphasise, perhaps correctly, that the women's movement contributed significantly to their research, prevailing generalisations about how all gender research in India was propelled by the movement is a romanticisation. Certainly it was not obvious within my own discipline – economics. The topics of my research, for example, did not arise out of the movement although my involvement in it gave me important insights for my work. I have often found an inexplicable resistance within many autonomous groups to accepting structural economic inequalities as significant factors in women's disempowerment. In the 1980s, when I began my research on women's rights in land and property, for instance, I spoke to many women's groups. Unlike the women's organisations in the 1930s-40s, virtually none in the 1980s had taken this up as a major issue. I was especially surprised by responses from several left-wing women's groups saying they had not really thought about this, or that taking up the question of women's *individual* property rights went against their vision of a socialist society. Yet none had objected when land reform programmes gave landless men rights in land.

There was also an uneasy response by some when I presented my more recent and empirically robust research findings of the notable link between women owning property and their dramatically reduced risk of domestic violence, at a major international conference, "Confronting Violence" held in Delhi in 2004. This work, co-authored with a colleague, related to Kerala, and subsequent work by others, such as by the late Jayoti Gupta for West Bengal, found similar associations.

It is also telling that of the two major legal changes favouring women in 2005 – the Hindu Succession Amendment Act and the Domestic Violence Act – only the latter has received due attention from most women's groups. Yet the HSAA provides women with a genuine exit option from a

violent and abusive marriage by giving daughters equal rights with their brothers in all parental property, including joint family property, and by giving married women a legal right to reside in their natal home and claim partition of parental property. In other words, the HSAA could provide strong complementary support to the DVA; and on some counts, such as residence, it would be a more feasible option than that provided by the DVA, which gives a woman the right to stay in the marital home and seek a legal order to have her abusive husband leave the house, or keep away from her part of it (an unrealistic option for most women living in small joint family homes, typically owned by in-laws), or secure her an alternative accommodation (again almost impossible to enforce for most women).

This limited engagement with mechanisms for women's economic empowerment by most activists of autonomous women's groups (with some exceptions mentioned below), raises a number of questions to which I have no clear answers. Why have these women's groups remained so strongly focused on violence against women and so limitedly on women's economic empowerment, in particular their access to assets such as land and housing which are critical for livelihoods? Why is there a reluctance to focusing on women's property status, even when we note strong links between owning property and security from violence?

Similarly, although women's reproductive health received substantial attention from the movement in the 1980s – it paralleled a global focus on women's control over their bodies – other major health concerns, such as the life-threatening impact on village women of cooking with smoky biofuels, received no mention at all. Some 92 per cent of rural domestic energy in India still comes from such biofuels (firewood, crop-waste and dung) and women's risk of mortality from smoke-related infections is 50 per cent higher than men's. How has

such a significant gender issue been missed? Is it that the movement has been too strongly influenced by western feminist agendas which focused mainly on violence against women? Is it that issues such as women's property status are too conflictual? Is it that the movement has an urban bias?

There are, of course, exceptions. Major women's groups such as SEWA and political-party linked groups like AIDWA *have* focused on women's economic situation in important and effective ways, as have some grassroots organisations working with rural women. The issue of land, livelihood and women's property claims has also found fertile ground among some regional groups who are seeking to register women's legal claims, holding tribunals to hear cases of women's disinheritance, and seeking innovative ways to get husbands to recognise wives as equal sharers in their property, even though Indian law does not recognise the concept of matrimonial property. But, typically, these groups are not specifically women's groups; and, on this issue, we have not seen the cross-group mobilisation witnessed during the anti-dowry agitation of the 1980s, or in the more recent campaign for women's quotas in parliament.

In my own efforts to translate my research into practice, also, I have found more ready partners among gender-progressive rural groups working with both men and women. For instance, a request from the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India) in Gujarat to conduct a two-day workshop on women and land for rural NGOs in 2002 led to the formation of an all-Gujarat network, which has since expanded. Women in the network lobby policy-makers, train village officials to register women's land claims, interact with the media, and so on. Similarly, in 2005, in the campaign for the comprehensive amendment of the Hindu Succession Act, my immediate partners were the heads of the Human Rights Law Network and the Housing and Land Rights network. The support for

our petition to the government came from a wide spectrum of progressive civil society activists and groups – some of them were women's groups, but many were not.

Of course, it can legitimately be argued that gender sensitivity now permeates numerous organisations precisely because of the women's movement. It is certainly the case that by persistently raising gender concerns on diverse counts and in diverse forums, the women's movement has made it impossible for governments and non-governmental organisations to ignore gender inequality in its many manifestations. At the same time, the movement has not directly mobilised on many key concerns which affect poor rural women's everyday needs.

And in academia?

The women's movement has also had limited impact on gender discrimination in academia. Although many of us wore several hats and joined the movement with fervour, there was little reciprocal response from full-time activists to the problems that professional women were facing in their working lives. This included not just sexual harassment, but various subtle prejudices and gender biases which kept women from getting tenure or promotions or rising to positions of influence.

Several feminist economists, for instance, have commented on the striking effectiveness of old-boy networks in ensuring that significant policy positions are filled from within their small circle. Nowhere is this more apparent than in positions which require expertise in economics. It is notable that our prime minister's panel of economic advisers has never had a woman. It is rare for major research institutions and think-tanks to have women heads. The Thirteenth Finance Commission was the first such commission to include a woman, but only one – Indira Rajaraman. The prime minister's cabinet has never had women as ministers of finance or economic

affairs; and in the finance minister's pre-Budget consultation meetings in 2009 and 2010, I was the only woman present among some twenty or more economists.

Gender bias in academia was recognised a long time ago in western countries and challenged by women academics, but in India we have a long way to go. Increasingly, western universities have women vice-chancellors, but till date very few Indian universities (other than all-women ones) have had one. If there were more women with feminist persuasions in positions of influence, I believe there would be genuine gains for women at all levels. Economic policies, for instance, affect the lives of millions of women – rich and poor – and gender-sensitive policies could bring them notable gains. Do I feel strongly about women's economic empowerment because I am an economist by training? I don't think so. There is a vast body of evidence that women's bargaining power and ability to challenge restrictive social norms improves greatly if they are more economically empowered. This may not be a sufficient condition, but it is often a necessary one.

The recognition of sexual harassment in the workplace, again, has a long way to go. Although, formally, each public institution is now required to set in place a mechanism for redressal, workplace culture remains largely unchanged, and many men within academia would be hard-pressed even to describe what constitutes sexual harassment. Another challenge is to build more democratic structures for taking poor women's concerns to policy-makers. Many of us from middle-class backgrounds are consulted off and on by them; we accept such invitations and speak on behalf of women with the utmost sincerity, but how many of us have the pulse of poor women and what they need? And such needs are not only those that they themselves identify, but also ones they may not dream of identifying because they have 'adapted' their preferences to what they think is possible.

I found this adaptation striking in my many conversations with rural women not only in South Asia but also in other countries. In 1997, for instance, I was invited to lead a conference on gender and land in South Africa. I subsequently visited a resettlement site near Pietermaritzburg, where a large number of women were growing vegetables and keeping poultry on recently restituted land, while most men were away on other jobs. When I asked a group of 25-30 women in whose name these plots would be registered, they said, in the names of their husbands and oldest sons. Persisting, I enquired – but wouldn't it be better if the land was in your names or in joint titles, since you are the ones doing the farming? Initially they were silent, but finally one of them said: "We are taking so long in answering because no one has ever asked us this before! It seems like a dream that we might have land of our own."

Women adapt to their circumstances in many ways – we all do. Even those of us who might march on the streets protesting domestic violence may be unable to publicly acknowledge such violence in our own homes. It is not easy to practise what you preach, nor are feminists separated from non-feminists by a simple line which they can step over. 'Feminist' is a process of becoming. And our inability to share the pains and hesitations we carry in our hearts means that that process is still incomplete – both in terms of our own transformation and in the ability of the women's movement to bring about such a transformation.

Towards a humanist feminism?

In retrospect, I believe we were too judgemental in the movement when we were young – not patient enough with those who were tentative and hesitant, who appeared less advanced in their journeys to stand up for their rights than we thought we were. We were so busy confronting patriarchy in

men that we failed to confront it in ourselves. What I missed in my friendships with women in the movement through the 1980s, and continue to miss, is gentleness and a sense of nurturing. For this I turned to my father who was gentler and more of a friend than many who carried the flag for women's emancipation. As I have said earlier, my father is a humanist, not a feminist. And it is from that source that his insights about women's problems arise. When he was in his thirties and in charge of all Delhi's telephone and postal services, he introduced air-conditioned dormitories where off-duty women telephone operators could sleep at night and return home in the safety of morning light. Earlier they simply dozed fitfully on chairs in Delhi's heat. That was in 1958. There was no women's movement to propel my father's initiative; it arose from a deep considerateness towards others and the willingness to use his authority for the greater public good.

I think if we had woven some of that humanism more self-consciously into how we related to one another in the women's movement, we would have transformed both the movement and society by demonstrating alternative ways of relating and being. This would have carried us like a tide into a new era. Is it too late for us to pick up the banner again for that cause and carry a new generation of feminists with us?



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Her election to the Committee for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, on which she currently serves, has given her international experience in the field of women's rights and enriched her advocacy, particularly with regard to ending violence against women. She was the first woman to be designated a Senior Counsel in the High Court of Bombay in 1985, and is currently the first, and only, woman to be appointed Additional Solicitor General of India. She was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India in 2005.

An Outsider, Inside

INDIRA JAISING

I have often been asked the question: how did you become what you are, how did you excel in a male-dominated profession, how did you come to work on socio-legal issues? I don't know, perhaps there are no real answers to these questions, or perhaps all answers are rationalisations of one's past. Or maybe some memory of displacement has always been with me and it propelled me into the fascinating world of activism in law.

My family is from Sindh, and they migrated to India at or about the time of Partition in 1947. I still have memories of my grandparents' house in Pakistan and think of it as the home of my childhood. The horrors of Partition have escaped my memory, but the longing for my ancestral home has not. I sometimes wonder whether this longing is just another form of escapism or a symptom of a real connection with my past. Years later I visited Pakistan, a step which I alone in my family took – the older members of my family had no desire to do so – and remember the wonder that I felt when I heard people in government offices, the visa officer, the police house officer speak to each other, and to me, in Sindhi. For the first time I realised that the language into which I was born was actually spoken by a majority community in some part of the world. In India, from childhood, I was aware of the fact that in a country divided into linguistic states, the language I

spoke at home had no state. It made me feel stateless. This feeling has been with me since my days at school, and I tend to think that in some ways it has given me a certain rootless freedom – of mobility and identity, an identity which I created for myself. I know that generations that came after me in my own family do not feel the same way, nor do they have the same memories. Perhaps I carry the legacy of midnight's children. For the rest, my childhood was uneventful, born as I was into a family of businessmen accustomed to travelling from the port of Karachi to the port of Bombay.

Like all girl children in Sindhi families I was expected to marry early in life, procreate and settle down. I did neither. (I married much later in life, after I felt I had acquired a certain level of independence and autonomy in my career.) No sooner did my parents try to marry me off, than the question of dowry arose. I distinctly remember my proposed in-laws negotiating dowry with my parents. I was horrified. We lived in a joint family, and I had seen my cousins getting married with negotiated dowries and the consequent disputes in the respective families. The institution of dowry was entrenched in the Sindhi community, nobody questioned it. My parents thought it was natural, and even said so to me as justification for negotiating. So widespread was the evil in Sindh that it had its own Anti-Dowry Act long before our act of 1961. The community seemed to have carried its most backward traditions into India after Partition, but I knew that this was not the life for me.

My refusal to be bartered away in marriage gave me a sense of self-worth. The life option of an early marriage and childbearing having been ruled out, a career was what I wanted, the ability to work and earn my own living. I pursued that option and chose to study law. Not having any lawyers in the family once again gave me the freedom and ability to invent myself. I do believe that I owe a large part of my

'success' to the fact that I had no one in the family who practiced law, and so I could choose my own role models. But I found none. Again, I had to invent my own, which I proceeded to do. Having lived in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as we have done, I have seen three generations of families of lawyers, from father to son to grandson – but never mother to daughter (or father to daughter) to granddaughter. I have seen the transformation of law from being a profession to becoming a family business; what is more, I have seen members of the same family become judges, fathers to sons. It is almost as if I have seen the office of a judge become a hereditary one! I used to wonder how, in a democracy, such a phenomenon could exist. My good fortune (again related to the fact that I had no lawyers in my family) allowed me to escape that trap and look at the situation objectively and critically.

When I entered the profession it had a sense of stability about it. It looked for no change. Inherited legal practices from the British colonial regime seemed to be the only way to do law. The entire process of development in the legal profession was one which excelled in perfecting the tools, techniques and procedures left by the British. The prime purpose of the Advocates Act, for example, was to create one category of lawyers, doing away with all other types of indigenous practitioners. Unthinkingly, we accepted the oneness of the profession, without pausing to wonder whether it could serve the needs of the vast majority of people in the country in that static form. Those were days when the courts, particularly high courts and the Supreme Court, were unaware of their constitutional function and saw the judiciary as nothing more than a forum for resolving disputes. Those who were, chose to throw their weight behind a dying feudal order, striking down land reform legislation. Human rights did not figure in the debates or judgements of that era.

I struggled to find ways and means to make my work

relevant, not only for myself but also for others. Fortunately, I was exposed to activist ways of achieving social goals, through a fellowship at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies in London, where I met several people who were engaged with law in a mission that was larger than them. This was in the mid-Sixties, a time of intense activism around the world.

It took an event as traumatic as the Emergency of 1975 to polarise Indian society and make all of us take a stand on which political side we stood. I chose to oppose the Emergency and worked with many others who resisted the suspension of all civil and political rights. This represented a turning point in my life and, I think, in the life of the judiciary as well. I saw it crumbling before the might of political power, before my very eyes. The judiciary was unwilling and unable to protect citizens against the deprivation of the most basic of all human rights, the right to life.

It was during the Emergency that the idea grew in the minds of some of us who were opposing it, that we needed to put together an organisation of lawyers which would serve activists in the trade unions who were being arrested and repressed. We created the Workers' Law Centre. Since the railway strike under the leadership of George Fernandes was the immediate provocation for the Emergency, we became involved in providing legal services to the dismissed and victimised railway and other workers. That Centre was the forerunner of the Lawyers Collective which was founded in 1980 with similar aims and goals, except that it extended its reach to other sections of society, including women, children and the homeless. In 1986 *The Lawyers'* commenced publication of the first monthly law magazine in the country. Its aim, as stated in the first editorial, was "to break the culture of silence" that exists around the judiciary, to provide legal literature in readable language to those who need it most, and to address the legal problems of dispossessed sections of

society. Its back page, *Adalat Antics*, was the most widely read; it published reports of what lawyers talk about in the precincts of the court but never dare to mention *in* court. Some called it 'gossip' – I thought it was alternative news. The magazine itself stopped publication in 2002 for want of funds. By then it had made its mark by doing the first-ever exposé of a sitting judge of the Supreme Court of India, by publishing the full text of the internal audit report of the High Court of Punjab and Haryana on the excessive expenditure incurred by the judge in furnishing his own house. It was that report which finally broke the 'culture of silence' around judges and subjected their non-judicial conduct to scrutiny. Since then, although we still don't have a law on the accountability of the judiciary, civil society has persistently demanded it by raising the issue whenever the judiciary has stepped out of line.

The Lawyers' Collective itself has undergone several transformations and has been a role model for other organisations; it has a women's rights project, an HIV/AIDS project and a human rights cell, but like most NGOs, it does face a crisis of leadership, a challenge which we are struggling to meet. Lawyers are individualistic by training, not particularly suited to the task of institution-building. The Lawyers' Collective has not been immune to this shortcoming. It is a constant struggle to find solutions to the problem of sustainability. Today the organisation is involved in providing legal aid and advocacy within the constituencies that are concerned with the groups we service, and with law reform. An example of the latter was our campaign for the introduction of a law on domestic violence. This is not the place to document the campaign, but it represented an attempt to intervene at the policy level rather than addressing individual cases alone. These activities have meant having to work out a new equation of engagement with the state, without losing

our autonomy. The law was passed in 2005 as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. I remember one judge (who later became a judge of the Supreme Court) asking me in 1999, what I meant by "domestic violence". A concept unknown to law as recently as 2000, now forms part of legal tender and the new law is the primary protection for women from violence. Often the most difficult challenge of all is to give a crime a name, to recognise it as one, before you can ask for relief. Domestic violence was an injury without a name, but in 2005 it did get named as a wrong; the challenge now is to get the law implemented in letter and spirit.

The revocation of the Emergency and the defeat of the late Indira Gandhi at the polls in 1977 was also a message to the judiciary that the will of the people could undo undemocratic judgements. While the government changed, the judges who endorsed the Emergency remained. This had the potential to create the most dangerous collusion between the judiciary and parliament. Many of those in detention whose cases the court had heard during the Emergency, were now sitting in parliament, including George Fernandes himself. Clearly there was a need for the judiciary to create a new role for itself in the life of the nation, if it was to have any relevance at all. An activist post-Emergency press provided sufficient evidence of the rot in the judicial system, exposing its near collapse, with undertrials in prison for periods longer than they would be if convicted. These apparently non-political issues became the 'soft' issues that the judiciary took up to establish itself as a change-maker. It was almost as if it embraced the *Garibi Hatao* slogan of the outgoing government as its own. Here we see an interesting transference of the pre-Emergency agenda of the outgoing government into the post-Emergency agenda of the judiciary. It created the illusion of continuity and met the expectations of the people that had been raised by the populist slogans of the past. The judiciary

began to create democratic spaces within which the voices of the excluded could be heard. It invented public interest litigation, within whose framework issues relating to violations of the fundamental rights of citizens could be raised. Justice P.N. Bhagwati attempted to articulate the theoretical basis of public interest litigation. He said it was required because the British model of adversarial justice was unsuited to Indian conditions, as that system presupposed a high degree of knowledge and information about one's rights. It was based on "self-identification of injury and self-selection of remedy". In a country like India, this option was not available to the vast majority of people because of illiteracy and poverty; it was therefore necessary to allow civil society to intervene to protect the rights of the disinherited.

In hindsight, it was perhaps inevitable that the task of theorising public interest litigation should fall on the shoulders of one of the very judges who had authored the Emergency judgements. This, too, was among the historic transformations that the judiciary undertook for itself. It is worth recalling that many of the 'Emergency' judges continued long after the Emergency was revoked. Justice Bhagwati retired in 1985; Justice Chandrachud, who wrote the *Olga Tellis* judgement on the rights of the homeless, retired in 1986. We sometimes forget that the Emergency court judges were also the post-Emergency judges, and they carried both the burden of memories of the Emergency court and of undoing that legacy.

In the early Eighties, courts were willing to play an activist role in fact-finding in order to test whether rights, including fundamental rights, were being violated. Groups such as bonded labour, child labourers and undertrials had no means of voicing their own grievances, so others would be permitted to do so on their behalf. I was part of this historic process, excited by these ideas. My activism in taking up the cause of the homeless pavement-dwellers and hawkers of Bombay; in

representing the women vegetable vendors of SEWA (Ahmedabad) belongs to this phase of my life. I promptly occupied the democratic space opened up by the courts – I was ready for it. There were many others like me who saw a role for themselves in democratic lawyering, a role unavailable earlier. These were new beginnings for many of us who believed that we were in a profession that had a social function, that was not just another business. While earlier the court had been dealing with civil rights, it had little or no occasion to address social and economic rights. In the post-Emergency phase, the Supreme Court of India began to deal with these, too.

I began to work on my chosen subjects with great passion. Women and their problems in the field of family law had always been of great concern to me in my practice. The courts could now take the constitutional right to equality seriously. Many like me, who had felt that there was no place for us in the judicial system, found ourselves included in the adventure of building a democratic and just legal culture. Those were exhilarating times. We were engaged in the process of rewriting the history of the court. We were exposed to great judges. I realised that there was something in the nature of law which made it susceptible to being shaped and moulded to become something new. Law is in the written word; and it is in the very nature of the written word to be open to interpretation when applied to a given situation. This gave judges the power to *interpret the content of law*. Interpretation is necessarily a function of an individual's philosophical, social, political and spiritual convictions. I had my own, and this enabled an ideological debate in court and made it possible to influence the outcome of decisions.

This gave me a sense of perspective about my own role; it allowed me autonomy and a real independence from the system of spoils and patronage in the legal profession. It enabled me to keep my distance from people in positions of

power. As a result, I never chose to seek public office and maintained my role as the 'outsider' very comfortably, with all its attendant advantages.

My women clients have influenced me immensely. Mary Roy refused to succumb to an unfair legal regime applicable to Syrian Christians in the state of Kerala, by virtue of which daughters were virtually disinherited in favour of their brothers. Equality for her, as for many other women, was a felt need. She had returned to her ancestral home after the breakdown of her marriage and was told that she had no rights to the property. Armed only with an unshakeable belief in equality, she approached the Supreme Court for justice. It was then that I met her, and together we worked for making the right to equality a reality for her. We succeeded in getting a judgement which made a more equal law applicable to her, under which she would inherit equally with her other siblings. Mary Roy taught me the power of the constitutionally guaranteed right to equality, but her battle did not end with the judgement. I don't think that she has benefitted from it, but she knows that several other women, similarly situated, have. P.K. Saru was one of the first Muslim women to question the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act (1986) and I had the privilege of representing her. She, too, succeeded in getting a judgement that, as a divorced Muslim woman, she was entitled to "reasonable and fair provision and maintenance," and not just maintenance for the iddat period. Several years later, the Supreme Court in *Danial Latifi* interpreted the Act in the same way, holding that divorced Muslim women had the right to claim maintenance from their divorced husbands for life. One of the ironies of our profession is that I saw an NDA government defending this law, which on public platforms was condemned by them as being an act of "appeasement" of Muslims by the Congress. But in the courtroom, political differences vanished.

What Saru and Mary Roy had in common was the ability to say 'No' to an unjust law. Years later, Githa Hariharan and Vandana Shiva, both in their different ways, rejected the idea that the father was the "natural guardian" of his children under Hindu law. Vandana Shiva maintained that the law made an unjust division between rights and responsibilities, giving rights to the man and responsibilities to the woman, who was her children's primary caretaker. All these women, belonging to different faiths, raised issues that were of national concern and each, in her different way, taught me that the women of this country have the tenacity and the passion to stand up for their rights. But the battle is far from won. I have often said that women have less protection in the matrimonial home than a tenant, who can only be evicted by due process of law. Not so when it comes to a married woman – she can simply be pushed out and the door locked on her, after which she is a "trespasser" in the matrimonial home. We need a law on matrimonial property to protect women from homelessness and to acknowledge their contribution, as homemakers, to the building of matrimonial assets.

The Supreme Court of India is perhaps the most powerful court in the world: it has the power to make and unmake not only laws, but the Constitution itself. It decides what the basic features of the Constitution are; who should be unseated from public office; what the rights of women are; how cities should be kept clean and pollution reduced; how dams should be built or forests preserved; as well as decreeing that education is a fundamental right. Most successful lawyers have shifted to Delhi through obtaining public office, such as attorneys-general or solicitors-general or by becoming MPs. The connection between law and politics has always been very close, but in my case, neither of these routes brought me to Delhi; rather it was Union Carbide. I had been travelling since 1985 to Bhopal for the legal proceedings that were a fallout

of that disaster. On behalf of Raj Kumar Keswani, the journalist who had predicted the disaster in a series of articles exposing the toxic nature of the chemicals used in the facility, I filed a public interest petition challenging the constitutional validity of the Bhopal Gas Leak Disaster Act. This petition came up for hearing in 1989. As it would have meant a prolonged stay in Delhi, I had to take a decision about my continued presence in the city. The course of my life has usually followed the course of my work, and so my second migration, from Bombay to Delhi and the Supreme Court, took place – the first being from Pakistan to India. Each year I thought I would return to Bombay; I am still here, living in different worlds at the same time. Delhi is not an easy city to live in despite its greenery and the lure of power. A former Supreme Court judge from Bombay once told me, “Delhi is one city when you are in power, another city when you are not.” Yet the power of the Supreme Court has kept me in Delhi till today. It is a different matter that the outcome of the Bhopal case in 1989 was so disappointing that my faith in the judiciary was almost eroded, and the very reason for shifting to Delhi was called into question. Could the judiciary deliver justice at all? Why was a settlement signed during the lunch break, behind the backs of the victims? On what basis was the figure of USD 470 million arrived at when the number of dead and injured could not have been predicted? Why was Warren Anderson allowed to leave the country? Why did the Supreme Court reduce the charge against the management of Union Carbide (India) from culpable homicide not amounting to murder, to negligence? All these questions were raised at the time the settlement was signed, but never answered. They have now been raised again, twenty-five years later, with popular sentiment outraged by the meagre sentences imposed on the guilty. These issues have come back to haunt the judiciary. How it deals with the challenge of the settlement

will define it in the twenty-first century. Will it recognise its own errors and correct them? Will it admit that it may be supreme but is not infallible? Will it recognise that the voice of victims, and not of governments, is primary in the matter of human rights and their violations? These will be testing times not just for politicians of all hues, but for the judiciary, too. They will also determine what the meaning of the right to life is in a nuclear India; it amazes me that lessons that the world learnt long ago have not been learnt here. Never in any other part of the civilised world would settlements be signed without the participation of victims themselves. That, if anything, was the cardinal sin of the judiciary. It was just not enough to say that the government represented the interests of the victims; this is a gross denial of their agency and their right to determine what they were willing to settle for. It seems we haven't learnt how to deal with mass crimes. I wonder if these expensive mistakes are in danger of being repeated with the Gujarat carnage of 2002, with victims once again being marginalised and decisions being placed in the hands of law enforcing agencies alone.

It is a pity that the rationale behind public interest litigation was never taken to its logical conclusion – that would have required a complete dismantling of the legacy of colonialism in law – which is why such litigation remains soft law rather than rights-based law. It is also the reason why, today, it is capable of being hijacked by the middle classes who can operate the levers of the court better than the labouring classes. Judges, too, have not understood and imbibed the jurisprudential basis of PIL, and have been unable to complete the unfinished task of dismantling undemocratic structures of governance. Power and authority are maintained while courts remain well within the framework of acceptable government policy. Judges are fond of reminding us that public interest litigation is non-adversarial, meaning thereby

that there is no conflict between the government and petitioners before the court. The court I work in today is not the same as the post-Emergency court. The historic role of Emergency and post-Emergency judges seems to have played out. We now live with collegium judges, a self-appointed judiciary, who seem to function autonomous of all social processes. We live in an era of globalisation and liberalisation and I cannot help thinking that these processes have affected judicial behaviour. There was a time when one could hear arguments in court based on the directive principles of state policy and the building of a welfare state; on the nationalisation of scarce resources and a redistribution of material resources; creating just and humane conditions of work and addressing the needs of victims of "undeserved want" – a beautiful expression borrowed from the Constitution. Today, there is an unwritten change in the directive principles of state policy; now 'disinvestment', 'liberalisation' and 'globalisation' seem to be the new principles of state policy and of the judiciary.

Their implications are devastating. While arguing for the abolition of contract labour that works in conditions akin to slavery, I have heard representations to the effect that the compulsions of liberalisation and the need to attract foreign investment require that contract labour be employed. While dealing with a case relating to the municipal corporation's duty to clean cities, I have heard it argued that the reason why scavengers are not doing their job is that they are protected by the Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Castes and Tribes Act, that if we want our cities cleaned we must repeal this Act. This argument says that if you call a scavenger by his caste name you will be prosecuted under the Act; therefore repeal the Act to enable us to keep cities clean. It seems that in court, liberalisation and caste discrimination go hand-in-hand.

We live in a time of terrorism and the judiciary has been

found wanting in these times. The case of Afzal Guru will remain, for me, a permanent black mark on the rule of law we profess to live by. Afzal Guru was convicted and sentenced to death without a lawyer of his choice to represent him. He was provided legal aid, but he made a request to change his lawyer on the ground that the one assigned to him was advising him to say things that were not true. The court proceeded to say that his lawyer had been discharged at his request, then promptly appointed the very same lawyer as an *amicus curiae*, and Afzal was left without a lawyer! By what logic could this be described as a fair trial? This is one case that so outraged me for its gross violation of the rule of law, that I submitted a certificate that the case required reopening by the Supreme Court, as there was a failure of justice through denial of legal representation in a life and death matter. Afzal's petition was rejected without a hearing; the order was passed on the day that the then chief justice of India retired. On that day, I heard him address a press conference, and one of the questions he was asked was about the Afzal Guru curative petition and its dismissal. His answer indicated to me that he had simply missed the issue at stake. He said that he, personally, did not believe in the death penalty, but as long as it was on the statute book he had to agree that it could be given. What had he understood of the petition? There was no mention of the death penalty in it, it was about denial of a fair trial, not about awarding the death penalty – there was no mention of this at all in his interview. It seems that so great was the power of the label of terrorism attached to the name, Afzal Guru, that the real issues were lost in rhetoric and bias. While awarding the sentence the court referred to the "collective conscience of the nation"; soon several television channels began conducting opinion polls on whether Afzal Guru should be hanged. Have we reached a stage where the "collective conscience" of the nation is activated by opinion polls?

I visited Afzal Guru in jail later to tell him that the petition I had filed on his behalf was rejected. He was neither surprised nor afraid of death. He said all he wanted was to be shifted to a jail in Kashmir so that his family could visit him, and to have some music to listen to. He wanted a radio. I offered one to the jailor for the benefit of all prisoners, but he declined my offer. Left with no option, I offered to sing for Afzal Guru, my faith in the rule of law diminished but my faith in the healing power of music enhanced. At the time of writing, Guru is awaiting a decision on his mercy petition. Meanwhile the hysteria over the demand for his execution continues, with periodic loud noises at politically convenient times. Till date no one has looked into the question of whether he got a fair trial at all. The class nature of the criminal justice system stands exposed. Which son of a wealthy man has gone to trial without an equally wealthy lawyer to defend him?

We also live in times of pogroms and communal violence. The next major challenge the judiciary had to face was the demand to move cases dealing with the mass killings of Muslims in 2002 out of Gujarat. The core demand was to prosecute the guilty and investigate the role of politicians, including the chief minister, in the killings. Once again, the cases have been kept pending for several years with no end in sight, and once again, the criminal justice system was tested and found wanting. What the Gujarat carnage exposed was the inherent weakness of a criminal justice system that can be cynically manipulated by the party in power, given its control over the prosecution of cases, the appointment of prosecutors, and the power to intimidate witnesses and get them to turn hostile. Clearly, there is a need to detach the prosecution from the state by appointing an independent directorate of prosecution to ensure that prosecutors do not cave in at the instance of the party in power, the party responsible for the carnage in the first place. The real challenges are ahead of us:

how do we ensure the accountability of the head of state? When will we see the end of sovereign immunity? Citizens for Justice has asked for an investigation of the role of the chief minister of Gujarat in instigating the carnage, and in failing to stop the killings.

Meanwhile, on behalf of the widows of three brothers who were killed in the pogrom, the Lawyers' Collective has filed civil suits against the chief minister, personally, asking for compensation for causing unlawful deaths by acts of omission and commission. Knowing the power of the judicial system to prolong cases, I wonder if they will be decided in our lifetime.

These are some of the cases that have tested my own commitment to the rule of law. What is common among them is the desire to seek and enforce the accountability of the legal system, to seek the end of impunity for violations of human rights. It has been a struggle, for violation of the rule of law has been the norm, not an aberration.

At another level, India's commitment to international treaties compels it to look at its human rights record and at its position in the human development index, and makes it accountable in international forums. Given its ambition to be a global player in such forums, it needs to put in place structures which are inclusive and democratic, even if outcomes are not always inclusive and equitable. New laws like the Right to Information Act, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, the Right to Education Act, have all been passed under pressure from civil society and marginalised groups that have gained political acceptance of their interests. These laws promise to be the new constitution of India. In some small measure, we have been able to make up for the non-representative character of the Constituent Assembly and give ourselves a new constitution.

In 2008, I was elected as India's representative to the Committee for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. This has given me my first opportunity to look at the world as a global village and observe the oneness of the status of women, and I realise that there is no necessary connection between development and equality. The most developed nations are the most unequal when it comes to women. Germany, when reporting on the status of women, states that they have not been able to ensure something as basic as equal pay for equal work; the Netherlands says that more and more women engage in part-time and home-based work in their country. On the other hand Rwanda, when reporting, said that they had 58 per cent women in parliament, the highest in the world. This is not, as some believe, because the men were killed in the genocidal war; it is because their Constitution guarantees 50 per cent reservation for women in parliament. Political will, not economics, dictates development for women.

There was a time, a few years ago, when I thought that my personal and professional journeys were done. I was looking forward to the day I could migrate back to my hometown, Bombay, to enjoy personal time with family and friends, to do all the things I wanted to do, continue my interest in music, travel and do some bird-watching. Yes, even the urban jungle I call my post-Partition home has some extraordinary birds. There was always the Arabian Sea to enjoy, unlike the desert landscape of the capital.

But it seems I will have to wait a little longer to make my journey back home, my third migration – the first from Pakistan to India, the second from the High Court of Bombay to the Supreme Court and the third, home to myself. What seemed like retirement plans have turned into a deeper commitment to the profession of law. In July 2009, I was appointed additional solicitor general of India, the first woman ever to

be appointed a law officer of the Government of India. A grand-sounding title indeed, but what does it mean? And how did this transformation take place, from the 'outsider' that I was, becoming an 'insider'? Once again, many have asked me: how did this come about? What accounts for your success? How does it feel, being 'on the inside'? The question amuses me. I know how it feels, I have known it all along. I have been there before. It is a sort of homecoming, as well. If you live long enough, as I have, life has a way of coming full circle. Issues that I once addressed from the 'outside' have landed on my table as an 'insider'. I am not the only one to have made this transition. It is a historical transformation that has been in the making, on many issues and with many people. The last decade has seen a sea change in terms of civil society partnering with governments to introduce changes in the structure of governance. Activists with a serious commitment to social change have found a place on advisory committees and national forums, including such institutions as the Planning Commission and the National Advisory Council. Young activist lawyers with whom I had worked in the 1980s on public interest litigation have become judges. There has been a permeation of activists from civil society into structures of power, if not in electoral politics, in influential policy-making bodies. Almost all important government bodies and ministries now have 'advisors' who brief them on policy issues, rather than relying on established bureaucracies. The Supreme Court of India has encouraged this trend by appointing many very important committees to deal with policy – forest policy, hazardous waste policy, town planning advisory bodies, food commissioners, and so on. These have all been people drawn from civil society. The National Advisory Council consists of some of the finest minds in the country, committed to a more egalitarian society. The Indian ruling class has found a way to bypass the bureaucracy by gaining some relative autonomy

from it. I see my role as a 'public servant' in defending the rule of law, not the rule of the government, right or wrong.

My appointment is in keeping with the trend of democratising the structures of the state and ensuring diversity in public appointments. I plan to define the role of an additional solicitor general for myself. We are told that we are public officers, that we advise the government and represent the Union of India in courts. So what does it mean to advise the government and to represent the Union of India? For me, it means advise in accordance with the Constitution of India and represent in accordance with the law. We are meant to do what is lawful, not just what we are asked to do, regardless of the law. We hold public office in trust for the public. Since that is how I see my office, I know how it feels; it feels good to be 'on the other side'!

Access to the courts has proved to be a double-edged sword, giving the advantage to the dominant ideology. For example, courts have been willing to adopt the market mantra as a constitutional mantra, forgetting the directive principles of state policy and their redistributive goal. The challenges presented to courts today are not confined to child labour or bonded labour; even when they are, they can no longer be addressed in welfare terms – they will have to be addressed politically. The issues now range from challenging the path of 'development' that the Indian state has chosen, to signing the TRIPS treaty, the introduction of patenting for life-saving drugs, and so on. The challenge of a war being waged against our own people in Naxal-affected areas calls for an end to the impunity of the state. Peddlers of nuclear technology and the goal of being a superpower in pursuit of a seat on the UN Security Council cannot determine the content of the right to life guaranteed to Indian citizens. These are hard issues and PIL skills, such that we have, will not take us very far; they require the dismantling of a circle of protection built around

politicians, the bureaucracy and the judiciary that guards them against potential liability for human rights violations.

The other danger comes from the very nature of the democratic system we live in. We are not a banana republic, we do not have kangaroo courts, and military juntas do not remove our judges – so we are told that we live in a democracy. Yet our human development index tells the tale of the lack of inclusive growth in the country, newspapers remind us daily of malnutrition on our doorstep, and ethnic cleansing is evidence of the dominant fundamentalism of our politics.

An illusion of democracy is more dangerous than the absence of it. The illusion acts as a substitute for democracy in real terms, keeping us all in the comfort zone of the text of the Constitution, forgetting the spirit of it. Law and lawyering can be reduced to a game of words. The insensitivity of judges can reach unimaginable proportions. I was once witness to a judge asking his clerk to get him the cricket score in the middle of hearing a case regarding the rights of contract workers!

Have I been discriminated against? Yes, all women are, and I was no exception. Women in the legal profession have not been able to become litigators in court. They are seen more often in boardrooms than in court rooms. Many prefer to do transactional law and advisory work in law firms. Sex stereotyping in courts has been difficult to avoid; men do all the arguing. The easiest way to put a woman down is to say that she is aggressive when she competes equally with men; to label her hysterical when she brings the human dimension to bear on a case; to say she is a "behaving like a woman" when she behaves like a woman. Sexual harassment in all-male chambers is a major deterrent to women lawyers practicing in court. Maternity and childbearing are the main cause for dropping out, to the point of no return. I chose the excitement of being in court, with all its attendant disadvantages, the

occasional humiliation by judges, the male chauvinism around me, an environment which was anti-women; but I had the most important support that anyone can get, the support of those I represented – the homeless, the unemployed and women who were literally being burnt to death and thrown out of what is euphemistically called the matrimonial 'home'.

As I look back on a fulfilling career, I reflect on my own 'achievements' or lack of them. My freedom came from the fact that I had no role models, I was free to create my own. The odds were against me. I was a woman in a male-dominated world; I chose to represent those who had no legitimacy in society and that lack of legitimacy rubbed off on me. We were the outcasts of the profession. I believe that my status as an outcaste made me fight for a place in the profession, and it has been a successful fight. History was on my side. But I believe the legal profession is entering a different and new phase. The lawyers of this century, if they wish to survive in the tradition of democracy, will have to be political animals because the challenges are political. If judges start using the politically fashionable arguments of liberalisation and privatisation to deny relief to the people, lawyers, too, will have to find persuasive political arguments to counter them. The rule of law is, after all, a political construct, not just a legal one.

I sometimes hear arguments to the effect that the women's or other democratic movements should not approach the courts, should fight our battles in other forums. To them my reply is, the rich and the rights-enabled do not need the law, it is only the excluded who need it because they have no other weapon to fight their battles with.

Survival in a male-dominated profession requires that you do not become a cynic, as cynicism would result in dropping out. I have managed to avoid doing so through belief in the rule of law. For me this is not a luxury, but a necessity.

Survival and success, both, depended on my remaining and believing in my outsider role, as an activist and as a woman. In a curious irony, I owe my success to being a woman in a male-dominated profession.



Ilina Sen teaches women's studies at the Mahatma Gandhi International Hindi University in Wardha, Maharashtra. Her commitment to women, however, transcends this formal space; she has been active in the women's movement since the heady days of the 1970s and has written extensively on women's issues, particularly with regard to their political participation and livelihood. She has spent long periods among the mine workers and adivasis of Chhattisgarh and, as she says, "has spent a lifetime interpreting workers' issues to feminists and feminist issues to workers' organisations". Consultant to the governments of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in the formulation of their women's policies, she has, over the last few years, been actively engaged in the struggle for the release of her husband, Dr. Binayak Sen, who was imprisoned in Chhattisgarh on charges that many believe were fabricated. Her major publications include *A Space within the Struggle* and *Sukhvasin: The Migrant Woman of Chhattisgarh*.

Trying to Make Sense: Recollections from an Unfinished Journey

ILINA SEN

I remained an innocent right up to fairly late adolescence. In hindsight it appears incredible that the extreme uncertainty in which my extended refugee family lived – scattered all over India, sharing memories of *desher bari* (our home in the village in East Bengal) whenever they did meet up – did not alert me to the politics of borders, asymmetries and exclusions earlier than it eventually hit me during my years in college. Like many girl children, I have some memories of not quite belonging – like the time I discovered my father's early love letters to my mother written when I was on the way, but where all references to the child were of the *chbele* (boy) who was expected! To his credit, my father swallowed whatever disappointment he may have felt at the outcome of his efforts, and remained a very loving, supportive and encouraging parent to both his daughters all his life!

I suppose my first recognition of women's issues was in coming to terms with my mother's experience. A talented and trained singer, she was married off to a man in a transferrable job, and never really managed to develop the career in music that she desired. Her frustration as she moved every three years, and tried in the more civilised 'postings' of her spouse to get accreditation as a radio artiste, began giving radio

concerts, and then was forced to pack up and leave for the next destination, left its scars on the entire family. Finally, just when my parents decided to settle in Jabalpur after my father's retirement and she started singing regularly for AIR Bhopal, disaster struck with the death of my sister, followed fairly soon by my father's passing away, and she was again forced to move to a new locale. Late in life, living alone in Calcutta, she finally managed to record some of her songs in an extended play record format, shortly before cassette technology hit the market. A few years ago, she finally gifted the entire stock of her unsold records to my daughter to use as a painting base.

College in Calcutta in the late Sixties was a heady experience. From my sheltered girls' school in the north-east to be thrust into a city full of political graffiti on every available space, discussions, meetings, rallies, sloganeering – it was enough to take one's breath away. These were tumultuous times in the city; I don't think we have, even today, a proper appreciation of the energy, excitement, debates, differences, bitterness and strident assertion; of violent clashes between different claimants to the mantle of Left ideology, followed by brutal state repression of those on the farthest fringe of the Left, that was Calcutta at the end of the Sixties. As the city and the university slipped into chaos with academic sessions being delayed for up to three years, my family decided to extricate me and plant me safely back into peaceful Madhya Pradesh, where they had decided to settle.

I came into politics and the women's movement through a series of related and unrelated experiences. Sometimes I was just lucky to be in the right place, at the right time. From a sleepy existence in Jabalpur I landed in Delhi just as the international decade for women was beginning in 1975. The *Towards Equality* report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India had just come out, all kinds of women's groups and caucuses were being formed, even as many political

organisations were coming out of a period of forced hibernation after the Emergency.

My Jawaharlal Nehru University years were very important in shaping my concerns and commitments. Once again I was lucky that I was there at the fag end of the Emergency, and lived the full burst of freedom when it came. JNU then was a vibrant campus, buzzing with activity and political discussion and discourse of all shades of the Left. Some of the earliest discussions regarding the launching of a women's journal, that some time later led to the publication of *Manushi*, took place on the lawns of JNU's old campus. My academic work, too, helped anchor my commitment to women. Although I was enrolled at the Centre for the Study of Regional Development where the obsession with macro data sets entailed the suppression, repression and depression of many people, in my case, the experience was redeemed by my choice of research subject. Working on women's survival and the declining sex ratio in India, mapping its regional and historical trends, trying to understand the work patterns of rural women and of how and why women were valued (or not) in society, was an eye-opener. My interactions with the late Dr. Asok Mitra, my research guru, with Vinadi (Dr. Vina Mazumdar) and colleagues in the just-founded Centre for Women's Development Studies (where I was located for a short time) are among my most precious memories. Many of the people I worked with during this period have remained very close friends.

The Indian Association for Women's Studies was founded while I was a student, and under Vinadi's inspiration we all became members and travelled to Bombay for the first national women's studies conference. This was 1981, and shortly before this, Bombay had hosted the first conference of the autonomous women's movement. Many among the organisers as well as participants of the two conferences were common

to both, and the same ethos of activism, of being part of a larger cause, permeated both events. One noticed, however, that many women who were associated with specific (generally Left) political formations came to the women's studies conference, but not to the other. Over time, even as debates over the relative space accorded to academics and activists raged within the IAWS, we valued the women's studies conferences in particular because they provided an opportunity for interaction with those in the women's movement who were affiliated to different political parties, or to faith- or mass-based organisations. In other words, those who chose to stay outside the autonomy frame. I remember, particularly, an animated debate on the question of household labour among women from different political positions during the Trivandrum conference in 1985, that continued late into the night. The IAWS has been another precious connection that I continue to cherish, one that has survived both periods of my lean and fruitful involvement with its activities.

I owe the crossing of class barriers and the ability to integrate with working men and women to two major influences in my life. One was my husband, Binayak, with whom I have had a partnership of more than thirty years, with whom, through many ups and downs, I have grown and matured into whatever I am today. In the early years of our life together, I was fascinated to see him cuddle grimy children from the slums of Vellore as he researched malnutrition. Still later, in Chhattisgarh, he moved in with a worker's family while I was finishing my PhD in Delhi. One of our major spats occurred on discovering that I, too, was expected to stay there after I finished my studies. Although the family was extremely loving on my short visits, I could not cope with the idea of dark interiors and early morning visits to the field as a regular part of my routine. I still can't, and now my arthritic knees don't allow me to deal with squatting toilets in any case. The

accusation that my political commitment was only intellectual, not emotional, haunted me for a long time, and led to much soul-searching and self-doubt till many years later. Today, I think I can say with some certainty that there is no way that my intellectual commitment would have survived without an emotional component, and that my own life's trajectory may have contributed a little bit to breaking down the caste system between the intellectual commitment of academics and the emotional and pragmatic commitment of activism.

The second was my integration into the work and life of the Chhattisgarh people's movement. I arrived in Chhattisgarh via Hoshangabad in Madhya Pradesh at the beginning of the 1980s. My love affair with folk music began on the ghats of the Narmada at Hoshangabad, grew through the melas at Salkanpur and Sandiya, and continued with the rich folk repertoire of Chhattisgarh. My doctoral research on the 'work' that rural women did through the days and seasons of the year, expanded into recording women's music and dance – their spiritual singing, ribald singing, and songs of resistance. Ramkumar Bai's inspirational rendering of "*Ramji thore dinan ke bela...urb jaye re hansa akela*", and an otherwise demure Suman singing with gusto, "*Jis din uth gaya haath balam tonhe aisa maaroongi...*", are vivid memories. I met some remarkable people in Hoshangabad, many still my friends, but the best period of my life was yet to come.

In 1981, along with Binayak and friends Kamal and Sadhna, I made my first trip to Chhattisgarh to investigate the circumstances under which Shankar Guha Niyogi, the legendary labour leader, was declared a security risk and arrested under the National Security Act. Our train was hours late at Itarsi, and after eating countless plates of bread omelette, we fell into exhausted sleep once the train arrived, only to wake up as we crossed the most beautiful forests and hills that mark the southern borders of Chhattisgarh. Reaching Dalli-Rajhara

late at night, trying to find Niyogi's office in a curfew-bound town, we were electrified by the emergence of Comrade Sudama from some deep shadows, who guided us to the office with stories of the valiant struggles that workers were waging for their rights ('Phir Anasuya Bai ne pukara: awaaz do ...'). In the morning the office was bursting with life and energy, many women came and shook our hands, and Niyogi's colleagues told us that the mine workers were struggling for their basic right to be recognised as contributing to the growth of Bhilai. At that time they were regarded as expendable contract workers with no entitlements. Kusum Bai, one of their leaders, had died of eclampsia in childbirth because the plant doctors refused to admit her without a medical card. The workers were determined, they said, to build a hospital facility for themselves and others in similar circumstances, and were looking for 'comrade doctors' who could organise this for them. By the end of our trip Binayak was hooked to this project, and I decided I would continue my research even as I 'tried out' Dalli as a possible location for myself.

Although I first went to Dalli-Rajhara purely as an experiment and deliberately postponed a decision about locating myself there, I soon fell in love with it and Chhattisgarh, an *ishq* that I have still not outgrown despite the traumatic experiences of the last few years after Binayak's arrest and imprisonment. The twin townships of Jharan and Dalli-Rajhara were home to the captive iron ore mines of central India's public sector giant, the Bhilai Steel Plant. It was here that one of India's most significant independent trade unions, the Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS), came into existence on the basis of the material and cultural demands of first-generation Chhattisgarhi workers that were not being addressed by mainstream trade unions. In a typical manifestation of the 'Two Indias' theory, the regular jobs generated in the process of mining in Dalli-Rajhara all went

to people with technical training – who, by definition, came from the more developed parts of the country – and came to Chhattisgarh with their own regional cultural baggages. The manual work of mining was all done by contract workers, all of whom had been driven out of their villages in Chhattisgarh due to poverty and famine.

The bureaucracy of the mainstream trade unions (all of whom had offices and membership here) was singularly insensitive to the demands of the Chhattisgarhi workers, who themselves referred to the leaders from this phase of their lives as 'kal aana' netas ('come tomorrow' leaders), whenever they went to the trade union offices with their problems. Unhappiness about this state of affairs reached boiling point on several occasions, Kusum Bai's death being one of the most significant. When the old leaders refused to take up the contract workers' demands for two bamboos and a log, per family, with which to repair their huts before Diwali in 1977, a spontaneous meeting of over ten thousand contract workers at Jharan-Dalli's Lal Maidan decided to quit their old organisations and create a new one devoted to their issues. The post-Emergency loosening of the structures of control and release of jailed political prisoners gave the new union a leader in the person of Shankar Guha Niyogi, and a unique partnership between the masses and their leader gave the world an organisation that went beyond bread-and-butter issues into domains that were social, cultural and ideological. Niyogi himself had had a romantic engagement with Chhattisgarh, coming from north Bengal to Bhilai as a technical trainee, trying to build a radical organisation in the plant, working in quartzite mining under an assumed name, tending goats in a remote village on the borders of Bastar in an effort to find himself, till the police caught and jailed him under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA). The Dalli-Rajhara workers found him after he was released in 1977.

Together, Niyogi and the CMSS workers fought for recognition that the Plant was their principal employer; that they were entitled to bonuses and social security at par with regular workers; and, most importantly, that they needed to assert their social and cultural solidarity if they were to create a different world. They went on to build a hospital that still offers affordable and rational health care; they ran schools; delved into the history of people's struggles against British imperialism in the nineteenth century; created a cultural unit that would carry the songs of the Dalli workers' struggles and of the sacrifices of Veer Narayan Singh, Chhattisgarh's own hero of 1857, to all the villages around in night-long nacha performances. At first glance, CMSS was also a fantastic example of collective direct democracy, where all decisions regarding the trade union's functioning and social 'departments' were taken in long, long, evening meetings in the union office or garden. All of this was exhilarating, and during the Eighties Dalli-Rajhara became a favoured destination for many jholadhari radical/romantic youth from all over the country.

Its fascination and magic held me in their spell, too, but the most exciting aspect of life in Dalli for me was women's membership of the organisation. Chhattisgarhi workers worked in pairs, and husband-and-wife work teams were common. Effectively, the union had a five thousand strong female membership, all of whom were extremely independent, articulate and strong – their presence and voice lent a completely different aura to the simplest of organisational activities. This was a great learning experience for me as I moved in and out of Dalli-Rajhara, somewhat half-heartedly pursuing my research. As soon as that was over, I had no hesitation in deciding that this was where I wanted to be.

Interestingly, there were several single women who worked in the mines, and many new leaders like Durga Bai, Daya Bai, Amar Bai, Leela Bai, came forward to replace Anasuya who

fell to police bullets in 1977, and Kusum, who died because she was denied medical assistance. As I got to know them better I found their personalities and stories most inspiring. Durga Bai was a great public speaker – something many of these women excelled at – an object of wonder for mike-shy town mice like me. Durga Bai's husband had insisted on retaining his membership of the old union and this led to bitter arguments between them at home; but Durga stuck to her guns and continued to work for the CMSS. Leela Bai was unmarried, lived alone and was an artiste in the cultural troupe in the evenings. Daya Bai was fiery, if somewhat intemperate, would take no nonsense from anyone, had walked out of two marriages and was into her third. Amar Bai often argued with the male leadership over union issues, and spoke openly against the tendency to 'manage' and manipulate collective decisions behind the scenes. I often wonder whether the union's history would have been different had the women continued in the forefront. I say this because the organisation's prime time at Dalli was short, and when we left Dalli-Rajhara at the end of 1987, things there were already changing. The sectarian tendencies in the movement became sharper after Niyogi was murdered by goons hired by industrialists when he attempted, after 1987, to build trade union organisations in the private ancillary industries of Bhilai. With his death, a period of hope and achievement in the labour movement of Chhattisgarh came to an end. Although the newer organisations around Bhilai brought a breath of fresh air into the movement, the period that followed was much tougher.

The Dalli-Rajhara organisation inspired activity particularly among the so-called unorganised sector workers in many parts of Chhattisgarh. Their stories are connected yet separate, but are not part of this narrative. Within the home organisation, however, certain disturbing tendencies became apparent in the course of time. For one, as the union became successful

in securing economic gain for its members, the participation of women began to decline. In the late Eighties, women would leave union meetings at around six in the evening and head home to fulfil their domestic responsibilities, leaving the men to continue the discussions – a situation that was unthinkable in 1981. Women mukhiyas were also unable to deal with the manipulative power struggles that took place for positions in the overall leadership structure. Much intense politicking went on behind the scenes, accompanied by suspicion, activity-policing and the demonisation of certain persons or groups of persons, always in the interests of the 'larger good', and in the classic *Animal Farm* metaphor. The raising of women's issues in particular was viewed with great suspicion by those in control. I was horrified, fairly early in my stay in Dalli, to hear that Daya Bai's three marriages were unfavourably regarded by 'Bhaiya', held up as an example of her 'anarchist' tendencies. The Mahila Mukti Morcha – which existed, even before my arrival, as a front organisation with printed letterheads proclaiming that women must come forward because they had nothing to lose and a whole world to gain – came under a cloud of suspicion as soon as it tried to grapple with women's issues. The discomfort of my own situation finally came home to me – walking on a razor's edge, trying to insert a gender perspective into a workers' organisation and simultaneously trying to incorporate workers' perspectives into the women's movement.

My daughter, Pranhita, came into my life while we were in Dalli. We went to Pune for her adoption and when she came back to Dalli with us, the workers welcomed her with great love and affection. I had a bike and would ride to the union office with her strapped onto my back in a harness. Even today, on visits to Dalli, workers come and ask me for news of the baby girl who rode on my back. Aparajita followed Pranhita six years later. My daughters have given me so much

love and friendship through their growing years and as young adults that I feel truly blessed, and sorry for mothers without daughters – they don't know what they're missing.

Although I stepped back from full-time involvement in CMSS and its successor, the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM) in 1988, it is to everyone's credit that the relationship with the organisation continues to this day, and that walking the razor's edge did yield some positive results in different contexts. At the end of the Eighties, several women activists working with larger social justice movements came together to organise the Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan in Patna. Many of us who were involved in organising this conference had had very similar experiences, yet somewhere we all felt that the final accounting was far from negative. I believed then, and believe now, that women in broad democratic movements experience democracy in ways that they may never have experienced in any other context, and that as a result their collective conscience does advance. I tried to explore this theme through an analysis of several mass movements, which had a strong women's component, in my book, *A Space Within the Struggle*, which tried to contextualise the women's movement from the ground up.

Although the thought of moving out of Chhattisgarh did cross my mind when we gave up full-time activism in Rajhara, this option was quickly rejected because the cultural and emotional energy we had invested in Chhattisgarh would be difficult to replicate anywhere else, ever again. We spent the decade of the Nineties around Raipur, which today is busy transforming itself into a glitzy copy of Mumbai, but which at the time was an old-world commercial town catering to a large hinterland in Chhattisgarh as well as western Orissa. Binayak and I tried our hand at replicating some of the social experiments in Dalli with the forest-based, dam-displaced people of the upper Mahanadi around Dhamtari. They too

belonged to an old socialist organisational tradition, but their objective situation was very different. I spent time with migrant workers, trying to understand how women coped with the dislocation of migration and displacement. I have written about this, but it was only much later that I understood that the questions of rootedness, transplantation and relocation embedded in the migrant experience were also my questions.

It was during this period that developments leading to the creation of the new state of Chhattisgarh, accompanied by the finance-capital-driven jargon of mega development, gained ground. The workers' movement in Dalli-Rajhara had placed the Chhattisgarhi identity issue upfront, and had tried to theorise on the kind of livelihood-based development that would be in the interests of the region's toiling masses. In the Nineties, the issue of small states and accessible governance came up again, and by the end of that decade the three new states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttarakhand had been created. From a situation where, when I tried to explain to outsiders where I lived, no one had heard of Chhattisgarh, I suddenly found myself in a changed scenario – every incoming flight now carried potential investors, some brown, some white and some yellow. In the Nineties, I had been invited to draft the women's policy for Madhya Pradesh, and in 2001 I did the same for the new state of Chhattisgarh. However, the situation on the ground was changing rapidly. Statehood had brought formal structures of appropriation much closer to the people than at any time in the remembered past. Land acquisition and the privatisation of natural resources gathered speed, as did resistance to them. The new state showed scant regard for differences in views, for dissent and protest, tarred all dissenters with the same brush and was quick to characterise all of us mavericks as anti-social.

I retreated into full-time academics in 2007, teaching women's studies at the Hindi University in Wardha. Along

with many others in the movement, I had participated in building this new course for a new generation of students and had been teaching segments of it since 2004. In its own way, internalising the tenets of feminist thought in Hindi was a challenging exercise and, despite some hiccups, we did manage to put the course on a sound footing. Given the situation in Chhattisgarh this seemed like a good option, as Wardha would provide a different locale for working yet not be too far from Chhattisgarh, which we had made our home.

Binayak's arrest in 2007 on trumped-up charges of sedition came as a rude shock. It was my first brush with the state's archaic legal and police systems. For a person of my generation and education, it was hard to believe that the constitutional promises of freedom of thought and expression, of being innocent till proven guilty, were so fragile. The biggest sense of loss, however, was in coming to terms with the sudden withdrawal of all public recognition following the virulent media trial that was unleashed by the press in Raipur, happily lapping up police press releases. Even as middle class civil society crumbled under pressure, workers and their families from Bhilai, as well as adivasis from Dhamtari, among whom Binayak had practised health care, remained close to us and sustained our spirit much before the national and international campaigns for Binayak's release gathered momentum. My young daughters showed remarkable courage and maturity under stress, and my colleagues and students at Wardha were extremely supportive. Through this period of enormous stress and tension we nevertheless managed to build up our teaching department, and I am genuinely proud of the research work done by some of my students.

This is where I find myself today – somewhere on the road to a destination still unknown. I continue to teach at Wardha, even as Binayak's trial continues in Raipur. I still love going back to Chhattisgarh, although the police phone-taps

and surveillance are a constant irritant. The women's movement, the strength I have drawn from it and from my women friends, have been a great resource all my life, so that even in my worst moments, I have never walked alone.

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